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the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are undernourished has increased from 600 million to 800 million (FAO 1996). The number of people who are malnourished has increased from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion (FAO 1996).

There are a number of reasons why the number of people who are undernourished has increased. One of the main reasons is that the world's population has increased. In 1990, there were 5.3 billion people in the world. In 2000, there were 6.1 billion people in the world. By 2020, there are expected to be 7.9 billion people in the world (UN 1998). This increase in population has led to an increase in the number of people who are undernourished.

Another reason why the number of people who are undernourished has increased is that the world's food supply has not kept pace with the increase in population. In 1990, the world's food supply was 2.5 billion tonnes. In 2000, the world's food supply was 2.6 billion tonnes. By 2020, the world's food supply is expected to be 2.7 billion tonnes (FAO 1996). This increase in food supply has not kept pace with the increase in population.

A third reason why the number of people who are undernourished has increased is that the world's food distribution is uneven. In 1990, 1.2 billion people in the world were undernourished. In 2000, 1.5 billion people in the world were undernourished. By 2020, 2.1 billion people in the world are expected to be undernourished (FAO 1996). This increase in undernourishment is due to the fact that the world's food is not distributed evenly.

There are a number of ways in which the world's food supply can be increased. One way is to increase the amount of land that is used for agriculture. Another way is to increase the amount of food that is produced on the same amount of land. A third way is to increase the amount of food that is distributed to the people who need it.

There are a number of ways in which the world's food distribution can be made more even. One way is to increase the amount of food that is produced in the countries that need it. Another way is to increase the amount of food that is imported from the countries that have a surplus. A third way is to increase the amount of food that is distributed to the people who need it.

There are a number of ways in which the world's food supply can be made more sustainable. One way is to increase the amount of land that is used for agriculture. Another way is to increase the amount of food that is produced on the same amount of land. A third way is to increase the amount of food that is distributed to the people who need it.

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**THERE GOES THE GROOM**

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# THERE GOES THE GROOM

**BY**

**GORDON ARTHUR SMITH**

**AUTHOR OF**

**"THE PAGAN," "THE CROWN OF LIFE," ETC.**



**NEW YORK**

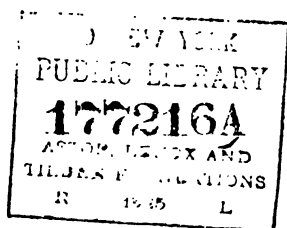
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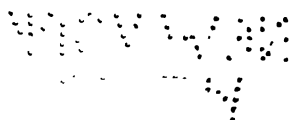
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# THERE GOES THE GROOM

## CHAPTER I

WHEN my amiable young nephew, George Coventry, came home from the war I, his uncle and guardian, was at the dock. "Hello, Uncle Foster," said George. "Is the town really dry?"

"How are you, George?" I answered, more affected than I cared to appear. "This is a wonderful day for me and—er—for the country."

"It's a pretty good day for me, too, I want you to know," said George. "We brought back seven thousand coon troops and they were all of them seasick."

"The flags are out to-day, George," I said. "Fifth Avenue, like a beautiful woman, is dressed in its gayest to do you honor. Triumphant arches are being erected at Madison Square and the Plaza and there is some-

thing strange but elaborate in front of the Public Library. We are proud of you, my boy; we are proud of you and of your comrades who come with you."

"Thank you, uncle," said George, somewhat embarrassed I perceived. "How's everybody? All fine? That's good."

"We are expecting you to dinner of course. You have no other engagement?"

"Not for three days," George replied. "I have three days' leave before I report for disenrollment."

"You are quitting the Army then, I take it?"

"Naturally," said George, and then he added: "I'm in a hurry to get out before they promote me."

"Are you in line for promotion?" I exclaimed. "Why, George, that is very gratifying—very gratifying!"

"Yes," he said; "yes, I've been in line for promotion for about two years. If I wait any longer I'm afraid the department will act." My nephew was a strange boy and sometimes his remarks puzzled me. He had a way of treating the serious things of life in a frivolous manner, and vice versa, and this was upsetting to a person of my age and generation. I say age, though I was but forty-nine at the time and,

moreover, my peaceful bachelor existence had served, I believed, to keep alive within me that spark of youth that a married man loses when he ceases to enter into competition with his fellows. It must not be understood from this that I was opposed to marriage on principle, since that was far from being the case. I was opposed to marriage merely for myself; for others I heartily advocated it; and especially, as you shall see, I advocated it for my nephew George.

George, the year of his return from the war, was twenty-six years old, an orphan and rather rich. He was the only son of my sister Bella, who had married old Daniel Coventry for his money, I fear, but who had never regretted it. By rights the marriage should have been an absolute failure and, since I myself and all of Bella's friends and relations had prophesied its failure, our surprise at its undoubted success was mingled with perhaps a trace of disappointment.

On the other hand, and as if to emphasize our fallibility as prophets, my stepsister, Mary, had married with our full and unqualified approval a charming young architect called Willie McKnight, who—well, it was the family scandal. It is sufficient to say that he finally threw a bottle of indelible ink at her, ruined the wall


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paper and the carpet and drove her to Nevada. But not before she had given birth to a daughter, whom they slyly named Annabel after her Aunt Bella.

Bella gave half a million dollars to young Annabel the day of the christening, which pleased everyone, I believe, except Daniel Coventry, whose money it was and who died shortly after from the shock. Bella, faithful wife, followed him.

So much for George's immediate relations. Most of them are dead and do not therefore figure largely in this mundane narrative. If I have neglected to say much about myself, it is because there is little to say, and that little will be amply revealed in the recital of events that follows.

As for George himself, I am very fond of George, but, as I have remarked, was puzzled by him at times. Perhaps the difference between forty-nine years and twenty-six accounted adequately for this; or perhaps it was because George had some of the Daniel Coventry characteristics—that brutal manner of facing facts, for example, and of removing the bloom from the peach. But then I am, or try to be, a poet and old Daniel Coventry was a money getter.



"George," I said during the drive to my house—for it had been decided that George was to stop temporarily, at least, with me—"George," I said, "if the question is not too abrupt, what are you planning to do when you quit the Army?"

"Loaf," said George without hesitation. "Travel a bit and loaf. You see, I've plenty of money and no ambition, so what else is there for me to do?"

"How about marrying?" I suggested.

"Oh," said George, "no hurry about that. Besides, that isn't exactly a vocation—I mean with an office and so on."

"I don't know about the office part of it," I said, "but I am given to understand that the hours are long and regular. Nevertheless, I venture to hope that you will commit matrimony at an early date and settle down."

"Settle down! That's just what I don't want to do," my nephew exclaimed. "I want to look round—travel, go where I want, eat what I want and retain my glorious birthright of freedom—life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. I love 'em all."

Of course George had some reason on his side, and he argued the way I had twenty-five years ago. But I felt, nevertheless, that mar-



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riage, though not for me, would be good for George—would stabilize him, would keep his feet from the pitfalls that everyone tells me beset the paths of young men. To marry and to live on a farm—that, in my capacity as his guardian, I was sure was what I should advise him to do. So I did so.

“George,” I said, “it’s all very well for you, a young man, to scoff at marriage and a settled life; but the day will come when you will regret it, and it will then be too late. Remember that a bachelor’s pleasures are but transient and are built upon the shifting sands. They have no firm foundation and with years they grow bitter in his mouth.”

“Careful of the metaphors,” warned George. “Are your pleasures bitter?”

“They are not so sweet as they were,” I replied. “But my pleasures, as you know, have always been simple—books, my verse, my friends. I often regret, however, that I have no children.”

“Well,” said George, “I can’t say that I do.”

There was a short silence. George has a way of writing finis to a discussion—of leading a conversation into a cul-de-sac.

“Speaking of friends,” he said at length, “I

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forgot to ask how the admiral and the Gold Dust twins are. All hale and hearty, I hope?"

"All in excellent health and eager to see you. They will be at dinner, of course."

Now the admiral and the two brothers, whom my nephew referred to as the Gold Dust twins, were my very intimate friends and companions. We had lived together, we four old bachelors, for more than ten years, always in the same house on Madison Avenue. Of the four, the admiral was the oldest, but even he never claimed to have served under Farragut at Mobile Bay. George used to say he admired him for that. The Gold Dust twins, so called, were twin brothers, Hector and Victor Ramsen, who, though resembling each other facially, had nothing else in common except a large fortune.

Hence George nicknamed them, with his delight in the absurd, the Gold Dust twins and he called them that to their faces. Somehow or other, coming from George, they did not resent the appellation.

"Yes," I said, "they will be at dinner. Also, I have asked Annabel McKnight and your Aunt Mary."

"Quite a banquet," remarked George with what I believed to be a pleased smile. "Does

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Aunt Mary still bear up under the loss of dear Uncle Willie?"

"Amazingly—as usual," I replied.

"That's good," said George. "You know, I always rather liked Uncle Willie and somehow I could never quite blame him for throwing things at my aunt. Besides," he added, "I think he nearly always missed her."


"It was the thought behind the deed that was reprehensible," I said severely.

"Yes," agreed George slowly, "I suppose it was. But Uncle Willie was an artist and temperamental. You, being a poet, ought to sympathize with that."

I was spared a reply, for at that moment the car halted in front of my house.

"Come on, George," I said. "Here we are."


My house—or, since I am only part owner, our house—was an old brownstone, five-story affair, one of the few of its kind remaining unaltered in its vicinity on Madison Avenue. To right and to left of us and across the avenue shops had sprung up, their wide plate-glass windows revealing furs, hats and ladies' underwear, cakes, candies and muffins, cameras, barometers and eyeglasses and, in at least one near-by instance, the huge blue and green vases of a drug store. The old-fashioned high front



stoops had been ruthlessly cut down and the façades of the ground floors had been replaced with stucco or with very modern, intricately laid brick. In many cases adjoining houses had been thrown into one, their former discreet privacy shattered to make a real-estate man's holiday.

Our house, as I have said, remained untouched; pleasingly incongruous, I liked to think, among the flashy novelties that surrounded us. George said that our house reminded him of a nice old lady lost in an aëroplane factory.

At any rate she was a comfortable old lady. The first two floors were devoted to the general use of all four of us. On these floors there was no privacy maintained and it was there that we entertained our friends. The third floor was shared by Hector and Victor Ramsen, affording to each a large bedroom and a comfortable study. The admiral and myself were similarly provided for on the fourth floor. The privacy of these studies and bedrooms was sacrosanct and it was an unwritten but rigidly-adhered-to law that no one of us should enter another's domain without definite invitation; no casual rapping on doors or dropping in to borrow tobacco or to ask a useless question.



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It was, thanks to this agreement, I believe, that we four elderly gentlemen were able to exist together under the same roof for ten years with scarcely a quarrel. The admiral was hot-tempered and a little profane; otherwise I should have said with scarcely a harsh word. On one occasion I recollect that the admiral had a violent falling out with Hector Ramsen—violent at least on the part of the admiral, for Hector was a quiet; studious gentleman, a professor of classics at Columbia University, and always maintained an unruffled composure. Indeed when at all disturbed he was apt to reply in Latin, which annoyed the admiral intensely.

“Speak English, damn, it!” roared the admiral on the occasion I refer to. “Speak English, or *hic jacet* for you, Hector Ramsen, and no *pax vobiscum* either.”

Victor Ramsen and I quieted the admiral with difficulty, for he had had three glasses of port. Moreover, the discussion had risen over the Battle of Salamis, and he felt that he knew more about that celebrated engagement than Hector, who was writing a monograph on the subject.

But I perceive that like all garrulous elderly people, I have strayed from my story. Remin-

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iscence! I must strive to avoid overmuch of that, for it is a certain sign of old age and I am not really beyond my prime. In fact, except for an occasional touch of neuritis, I feel as sound and as buoyant as George himself. Half a century! Bah, that is nothing nowadays if one remains slender or goes to a good tailor! Why, I remember—but no, I must remember not to remember anything more extraneous to my narrative, and my narrative concerns itself mainly with George.

## CHAPTER II

“**C**OME on, George,” I said. “Here we are.” I led the way up the steps, opened the door with my latchkey and rang for Martin. Martin was the man who, with his wife, occupied the fifth floor of our house and who, also with his wife, ministered to our comforts. He was an excellent butler, and his resemblance to the late Mr. Gladstone extended from his whiskers to his integrity. Martin and the chauffeur conveyed George’s numerous impedimenta to the house.

“Make up the couch in my study,” I said to Martin. “Lieutenant Coventry is stopping a few days with us.”

George shook Martin’s hand very democratically.

“How are you, Martin?” he asked. “And Mrs. Martin? Still keeping an eye on the four wild young gentlemen, I hope.”

This was another of George’s absurdities—the “wild young gentlemen,” I mean.

“All very good, sir,” answered Martin, beaming with pleasure. “And you, Mr. Coventry;

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I hope you're in good health—and welcome back, I'm sure."

I led George to my study and loitered vaguely about while he unpacked his kit.

"You have an hour before dinner," I said.

"Don't need it," said George. "Bathe and shave in fifteen minutes, and my other uniform's as easy to get into as this one. However, I'll wear my spurs to show I'm dressed up. All aviators wear spurs on dress occasions, you know. It shows they're not in the cavalry. Besides it keeps your neighbors from crowding you when you dance."

"You're as ridiculous as ever, I perceive—and just as incoherent. What is that ribbon, George?"

I pointed to a thin sliver of green and red which I had noticed for the first time on the breast of my nephew's tunic. It had previously been concealed by his overcoat.

"That?" said George. "Oh, I got that for cranking a Liberty motor before the self-starters arrived."

"Please be serious," I begged. "It's the Croix de Guerre, isn't it, George?"

"Uh-huh," he answered. "What direction's the bathroom?"

But he knew very well the direction of the



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bathroom and was out of the door before I could question him further.

"Never mind," I reflected. "His Cousin Anabel will be able to draw him out better than I. It takes a woman's touch for that, I suppose."

Presently, after a great splashing and an outburst of song, my nephew reappeared, clad in very scanty underwear, and commenced brushing his thick yellow hair vigorously. He seemed to have neglected to dry himself after his bath, for water was dripping down his neck and the spray flew at every stroke of the brushes. "You have broadened out, I think," I remarked. "Haven't you put on weight?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," said George. "It was an idle life and I ate like a swine. I'll have to run round a bit and get into condition again."

He looked in the very pink of condition, it seemed to me; a blond, tanned youth with no white about him save his teeth. Health and youth—youth and health! The two great blessings, and he had them both. I might have added beauty, but beauty is no blessing for a man and I am not enough of a Greek to lay much stress on it.

"Well," said George in a surprisingly short space of time, "I'm as ready as I can get. Shall

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I wait while you dress or go down and amuse the admiral and the Gold Dust twins? I don't suppose Aunt Mary and Annabel have turned up yet?"

"No," I said. "There is half an hour before dinner. Go down if you want and I'll join you as soon as I get into a dinner coat."

While I dressed my mind was filled with thoughts of George and speculations as to his future. As his guardian I felt that it was my duty to watch over him closely at this crucial time in his life. He was so young, and withal so full of experience—so innocent of the world, and yet so omniscient. I could scarcely believe that he had gone through two years of battle, murder and sudden death; that he himself had slain scores of men. It had left him so bewilderingly young and so amazingly light-hearted. And he would not—or could not—talk about it. Had he spent two years on a ranch in California he would have had more to say about his experiences. As it was, he seemed to have erased the war from the slate of his life.

Once more my mind reverted to the advisability of his marrying. Yes, that was the solution. I must marry him to some calm, healthy young woman who should be possessed of that rare attribute, common sense. Someone who

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should care for him, be an anchor for him, keep his feet on the ground. I fear I visualized a sort of trained nurse for his life's mate. I now realize my error, for I myself would never have chosen such a mate, and I had no reason mentally to foist such a one on poor George. But it is a failing that elderly people have always possessed, I believe—that of choosing something sensible and unattractive for their young. I suppose it is because they have themselves learned the perils of the nonsensible and attractive. Poor George! I am glad he did not know how I had mapped out his future.

I completed my dressing and descended to the living room on the second floor. George was in conversation with the admiral and the Ramsens, and they were plying him with questions, of course, especially the admiral. The admiral liked to believe that he kept abreast of the times and that the new developments in warfare held no secrets for him.

"I was one of the few officers in the Navy who foresaw the future of the submarine," he was telling George. "I've always been a great believer in progress—in trying out the new."

"I suppose then," said George, "that you are enthusiastic over aircraft in conjunction with the Navy."

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"Aircraft?" repeated the admiral, as if trying to remember the meaning of the word. "Aircraft? What in the devil has aircraft to do with a fleet? A lot of little flying machines that break down every few minutes—why, one hit from a four-inch gun would put a whole flock of them out of commission. No, young man, I said I was progressive, but I'm not a fanatic or—or a damn visionary."

That was the way of the admiral; always abreast of thought that was modern twenty years ago.

George only smiled patiently and Hector Ramsen, the professor of classics, murmured something relative to Icarus and his unfortunate attempt to fly to the sun. Hector was far too stout to hope to fly himself. He had a round, red face and wore spectacles in an effort, I believe, to conceal his cheerfulness, which radiated from him as from a child. Victor, his brother, who was a Business Man—with capital letters—had, strangely enough, the conventional scholarly leanness and the professorial manner. The Lord made the Ramsens twins, but he made them very dissimilar and he failed to adapt their physiques to their vocations. The admiral now—well, no one could ever have mistaken the admiral for anything but an admiral.

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One could almost smell the salt and one could certainly sense the habit of authority that only admirals, generals and bishops betray.

"Hello, Foster," said the admiral as I entered. "Welcome on board. This nephew of yours looks fit, doesn't he? Ought to take well with the women—that uniform and the decoration and all. Speaking of women, where's Mrs. McKnight and Annabel? Late, as usual. Well, I'll start mixing the cocktails."

The admiral was the self-elected custodian of our wine cellar. I myself have, I think, a happy taste in wines and am something of a connoisseur, but the admiral so obviously enjoyed his rôle that we refrained from interfering. It was, moreover, a very cheering sight for us to witness his operations with a cocktail shaker—almost the only exercise he indulged in.

He now pressed the bell and Martin appeared with the necessary ingredients. The admiral moved his somewhat portly self across the room to a side table and commenced the delicate operation of measuring gin and vermouth. All the preliminaries were performed with his back to us, but when the concoction was ready to be shaken he turned to face us with a great sigh of satisfaction and an anticipatory smile on his broad, ruddy face.

"Ah-h," he breathed, and then, brandishing the shaker furiously, he added: "Prohibition be damned!" He was engaged in filling equitably the seven glasses when Annabel and her mother were announced.

Now Annabel's mother I find easy enough to describe to you. As I have said, she was my stepsister, a daughter of my father's second wife. This fact she was and is at great pains to promulgate to the world because of the invariable corollary that "of course Foster is much older than I." She had once been beautiful in a sort of milk-maid fashion—the ox-eyed Juno, Hector Ramsen called her—but of recent years she had permitted herself to become uncomfortably stout. Naïve but coy, she had been, and playful and girlish; and alas, naïve and coy and playful and girlish she endeavored to remain. At forty-eight the results were unfortunate. No doubt that was why her architect husband had thrown the indelible ink at her head.

So Annabel's mother is easy to describe—but Annabel! Ah, Annabel's description taxes me beyond my powers. At that time she was twenty-five years old and very intangible—or very elusive. I don't know just which word I mean. The admiral expressed one opinion when he

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called her a demure little hussy, but the admiral adored her. We all adored her indeed, except Victor Ramsen, the business man. He maintained that she was totally uneducated and knew far too much for her age. There at least is another opinion. Hector Ramsen fairly worshipped her in his quiet, cheerful way, and went so far as to write an ode to her in Latin. He tore it up, because he said that Horace had written much better ones about her already. And that remark, I think, hits her off about right; she was a composite of all the delightful, fickle, lovable, tantalizing women that Horace has hymned.

Beautiful? Yes, I suppose she was beautiful. Old gold and rose and violet. There was nothing flagrant or striking about her coloring—no harsh contrasts, I mean. It was like a dim rainbow of delicate pastel shades—the old gold of her hair, the light carnation rose of her skin, the violet of her eyes. One felt that a master of color could not have done better. Her lips were not too red nor her eyebrows too dark—a fault I find in all brunettes; and there was a certain fineness, a freshness about her that not only was on the surface but seemed to be a part of her personality.

She was slim and straight and not tall. Her

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features were small—not classic, but clearly cut. When she moved she moved like a cat—gracefully, deliberately, with an object; unlike so many who move because they are embarrassed or at a loss for conversation. She did not laugh overmuch and she was never shrill. She—ah, well, I cannot describe her. I have tried and I cannot. She is indescribable—she is Annabel.





### CHAPTER III

**A**NNABEL greeted George with a step-cousinly kiss—at least, that being their relationship I suppose that the kiss was stepcousinly. Most young men in their twenties would have given those twenty-odd years to have obtained it, but George, who had been brought up with Annabel, took it very calmly and patted her back affectionately but platonically, as if she had been an attractive dog of which he was fond.

“You handsome young hero!” exclaimed Annabel. “I certainly am glad to see you.”

“Thanks,” said George. “You’re looking pretty fit. I’m glad you’re not getting fat like your mother.”

Now I protest that the above is no decent greeting between a returning young soldier and a beautiful girl. The younger generation takes things far too casually and is acquiring rapidly what is known as the British reserve. There was once a time when we Americans rejoiced to display our emotions—to wave flags and shed tears—but I fear that we do those things only

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in public nowadays. In private we stifle our natural instincts under that British reserve. This is true certainly of a certain class of us. But I still have hopes for the Great West, where, I am informed, people continue to slap total strangers on the back and to offer them drinks—near beer, I suppose, since July, 1919.

The admiral passed the cocktails, bearing the silver tray in his own hands.

“George,” he said, with a twinkle in his keen old eyes, “you being in uniform will not have one, I’m sure.”

“Of course not,” said George. “And we all know, admiral, how dry the Navy is. Here’s how.”

Then we went in to dine. It was a good dinner and a successful one. We drank George’s health, which Hector Ramsen proposed in a very happy little speech. He began in a humorous vein, his cheerful face shining behind his spectacles, but as he neared his conclusion there crept into his voice a note of earnestness, and we who knew him knew too his emotion.

“George Coventry,” he said, “is typical of what is so splendidly known as our Man’s Army. He is representative of its youth, its enthusiasm and its unfaltering courage. What France thinks of him she has evidenced by the

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strip of ribbon that he wears on his breast; what we, his friends, think of him needs no visible token. Rather it is he who has decorated us. He comes to us bearing gifts, but we do not fear him, for the gifts that he brings are honor and peace and victory."

Poor George was greatly embarrassed. He sat blushing like a girl while we stood and drank the toast. I noticed that Annabel's eyes were very bright, and my stepsister, Mary, was as usual weeping contentedly. Of course we demanded a few words from George.

He got up reluctantly, his face still red, his fingers nervously playing with the silver beside his plate.

"Well," he said, "that's a pretty good speech, but I wish Mr. Ramsen hadn't aimed it at me. It's the sort of thing we all feel, and we're all glad that our job was done to everybody's satisfaction. I won't say any more because the ice cream is getting cold and I see that Aunt Mary is diluting hers with her tears. I confess I'm a little teary myself. You see it's a long time since I've been home. Thank you."

No heroics about George, you see. I wonder if he has forgotten that he brought down eight German planes. We at any rate have not forgotten.

After the speeches everybody except George talked of the war. George merely answered questions—answered them at least to the best of his ability. His Aunt Mary, for instance, was eager to know how an aviator got down when his gasoline gave out in the air. She thought perhaps they sent up another plane to his assistance with an extra five-gallon can. Victor Ramsen wanted George's opinion on the soundness of the obligations of the city of Bordeaux, and Annabel asked if it were true that women in Paris were wearing no stockings. Hector Ramsen and I refrained from questioning, but the admiral, who before George's return had been considered an authority, told George all about the war, dwelling especially on Admiral Jellicoe's strategy at the Battle of Jutland and concluding with a brief critique of Italy's position with regard to Fiume. It was obvious that the admiral knew far more about the war than did George and it was equally obvious that he was determined to enlighten George's ignorance.

Mary and Annabel left shortly after the admiral's lucid exposition of General Gouraud's defensive tactics. Their departure interrupted the war talk and the admiral produced in its place—and an excellent substitute too—some

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Napoleon brandy—the last, I believe, of a dozen bottles that he had inherited from his father. Naturally this priceless liquor was poured only on very solemn occasions, and even then only for those who could appreciate it justly. Never for women.

“Huh,” grunted the admiral, “women couldn’t tell the difference between this and blackberry brandy—God bless and pity ’em!”

So the Napoleon was served with all pomp and reverence to the five of us men.

“Admiral,” said George, “you are doing me proud. This stuff is beyond thanks.”

We sipped it for a while in a dim, religious silence. At length Hector Ramsen, who—except for his speech at dinner—had been habitually uncommunicative, addressed to George a query that I myself had already ventured to propound.

“George,” he said, “what do you intend to do when you quit the Army?”

“Practically nothing,” said George. “Why?”

“I don’t know—I was wondering,” murmured Hector, and then added softly, “*Cælebs, quid agam?*”

“Which means?” asked George, smiling.

“Talk English, Ramsen.” adjured the admiral peevishly.

But Hector beamed, and his broad smile broadened his face.

"It means, 'I'm a poor dog of a bachelor and what shall I do to remedy it?' The Latin is perhaps more concise, however."

"Ah-ha," said the admiral, "you're suggesting that George get married, are you? Well, George, it's not a bad idea. Annabel now——"

"She's a sort of cousin," I interposed—"a stepcousin. No blood relation of course, but still——"

"That's so," agreed the admiral. "I forgot that."

"Wouldn't do at all," said Victor Ramsen. "Quite out of the question, I should say."

"Quite," said I.

"Well," said George, "that seems to settle Annabel. Too bad—I rather like Annabel. But, of course, I'm in your hands, gentlemen. Do with me as you see fit."

There was a brief silence, and then Hector Ramsen came out with an astonishing remark.

"I know a girl," he said ruminatively.

We stared at him, distrusting our ears. The admiral pounded his chair arm and emitted a veritable roar. Then we all roared. But little Hector sat smiling quietly in his chair, his hands clasped across his convex white waistcoat.

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"An excellent girl," he vouchsafed when quiet was restored. "Truly an excellent girl. She resembles a nymph, but has, I believe, more—er—stability—shall I say?—than we associate with nymphs. Had she lived in the age of fable some high god would have marked her and pursued her. Mars, I think—yes, Mars certainly. She is the sort that Mars liked, and I have always considered Mars an excellent judge. Warriors seem to have a keen eye for women."

This last was directed at George with an admiring glance from behind the spectacles; admiring and semi-apologetic, as if Hector were asking pardon for the intimate homage.

"Venus and Mars, eh?" remarked the admiral—rather coarsely, I thought.

Hector pondered this, shaking his head in dissent.

"No," he said—"no, not Venus. Younger than Venus somehow, and slimmer, and less experienced. More of the nymph, as I said, and poised to flee—startled—surprised. Daphne, I think."

"Is that her name—Daphne?" asked the admiral.

"No, no, no!" said Hector a little impatiently. "That is her prototype. Brush up

our mythology. Read the admirable Bull-  
ach."

I ventured an interruption.

"It was Apollo, not Mars, that loved  
aphne," I pointed out.

"Of course," agreed Hector. "What differ-  
ence does it make? I was merely trying to give  
you an idea of the girl. I don't care whom she  
comes from. I say simply that she is poised to  
me. That was Daphne and that is Deborah."

"There," observed Victor Ramsen; "now at  
last we have her name—Deborah. What's her  
state of issue?"

"I imagine that means, in your business  
man's language, when was she born? Yes?  
Well, I have not the remotest idea when she was  
born and it is, moreover, completely unimport-  
ant. She is young. Is, was and shall be. She  
may live long, but yet she will die young. I  
would like George to have the honor of meet-  
ing her."

"Thank you," murmured George. "I hope  
your intentions are honorable, Mr. Ramsen—  
are you trying to lure me into matrimony?"

The professor of classics blushed.

"It would be a fine thing for you, George,"  
he said. "I could wish you no better mate."

"But I don't want a mate," said George a



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little petulantly. "What have I done that you should all be trying to thrust a mate on me? Haven't you any pity for my youth and innocence?"

"But, George," I explained, "if you don't marry when young you are apt not to marry at all."

"I know," he answered. "And if you don't take to drink when young you are apt not to become a drunkard."

The admiral slapped his thigh resoundingly.

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Good boy, George! Have another drop of the brandy."

George refused. The admiral chuckled in his chair, but the professor did not laugh. I think his feelings were hurt.

"I'm sorry, George," he said. "I had no intention of forcing anything—anything distasteful upon you. I looked upon it merely as an opportunity for you to meet a very lovely person. *Detur digniori.*"

"Now you've made him mad," observed the admiral. "He called you some improper name in Latin. Better apologize."

"I do," said George contritely—"I really do. I'm sorry, professor, and there is nothing I'd rather do than meet your friend, Miss Deborah. Miss Deborah—what?"

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"Miss Deborah Peters," said Hector, mollified. "She lives at the end of Long Island—the far end. Her father is an assistant professor in the chemical laboratory at the university. A very able man—widower. I have been out at their place on the island. It is delightful—positively delightful; so simple as to be primitive, but beautiful roses and bees. It is like a pastoral. Virgil could have done it justice, but I am unable to do so, though I have tried. We will motor out some day after you have received your discharge from the Army. We might all go—there is an inn, I believe—some Saturday and Sunday. That is, if you still desire to go."

"Of course," said George. "Let us go by all means."

But I noticed that he sighed furtively—a sigh, I fear, of despondent resignation to Fate. He has told me since that he thought we were four old fools.

## CHAPTER V

**I**T was two weeks before George could rejoice us, but during those two weeks Hector had not been idle. On the contrary, I suspect—though he never admitted it, and we did not press the question—I suspect, I say, that he spent several days at Sun Harbor with his colleague, Professor Peters, and the divine Deborah. This was in late July, you must remember, and the university was closed for the summer, so that both professors had ample leisure.

The admiral, Victor Ramsen and myself were beginning to feel the heat and were contemplating a two weeks' outing, but were unable to agree upon a suitable spot. The admiral especially suffered and was becoming irritable. Hector admitted that a vacation was necessary, but urged us to wait George's return, shortly after which it was planned that we should motor down to Sun Harbor, sample the inn and, if it proved comfortable and offered enough distractions, stay on in the village as long as we could tolerate the simple life. The fishing, Hector assured us, was excellent; and the admiral is an

enthusiastic if unsuccessful fisherman. Also there were sailing boats; no stock ticker, however, to amuse Victor; and, Hector, added, no afternoon teas to amuse me.

So when George returned and got himself once more into civilian clothes we made ready to start. Unfortunately at the last minute Annabel McKnight heard of the proposed hegira and insisted that she and her mother accompany the party. I say insisted advisedly, for there was no invitation extended and no encouragement offered her by any of us, with the possible exception of George. He, I think, felt the need of some woman on whom he could rely—to whom he could run for shelter should the nymphlike Deborah flee toward him instead of away from him.

At any rate Annabel insisted, and—her mother being as wax in her hands—Annabel went. She went in her own runabout, escorted by George, and her mother perforce went with us, for the runabout held only two. This disconcerted us exceedingly, for Mary was so wide that we were very crowded in the tonneau and the admiral was forced to leave behind one of the baskets of claret that we had planned to take.

“And we won’t be able to make ourselves

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comfortable in the heat either," the admiral complained. "No smoking, I suppose, and no swearing."

"The uplifting influence of a pure woman on coarse man," I pointed out.

"Huh!" he said.

It was a very hot day indeed when we started. George and Annabel, being younger, got away first, and of course Annabel's mother delayed us. All sorts of coats and cloaks and veils and umbrellas and parasols and what nots. The admiral, I could see, was rapidly losing his temper. He mopped his brow with a large red handkerchief and fanned himself vigorously with his panama, and all the time he glared at poor Mary. She, however, was contentedly occupying more than half the tonneau, while two maids scampered in and out of her house retrieving the forgotten articles. So Annabel and George, as I say, got away before us; but it had been arranged that we should meet them at some roadside inn near Huntington for lunch—one of those so-called shore luncheons, I supposed. Hector recommended it highly, and as he seemed thoroughly acquainted not only with Sun Harbor but with everything that lay on the route we could not but acquiesce.

That motor trip to Sun Harbor will linger

long in my memory. In the years to come, when I shall have forgotten many of the pleasant events in my life, when even the bitter moments will have been sweetened by the sugar of Time, when I shall have forgiven mine enemies and their trespasses against me, I shall still remember that motor trip to Sun Harbor. It will hover as a black cloud athwart the sun of my memory. As I write of it now I feel an ache creep down my back and into my legs—a dull ache like the recurrent pain of an old wound in damp weather.

To begin with, one of the folding seats in the tonneau was allotted to me. It seems that I was the youngest male—a fact that had never before to my recollection been so greatly stressed. The admiral and Mary shared, though unequally, the rear seat; Hector Ramsen was beside the chauffeur, in order—as he craftily explained—to indicate the route; and Victor Ramsen was wedged into the other folding seat beside me. Victor, it appeared, was the second youngest male. The only relief to my annoyance lay in contemplating Victor's annoyance.

We bowled over Queensboro Bridge in a gloom that was in no way brightened by Mary's irritating cheerfulness—bright, coquettish little remarks, naïve observations on trivial objects,

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the sort of observations one would expect from a child of six, but which, emanating from a child, one would ignore. The admiral, it is true, ignored all of Mary's remarks but one.

"What a pretty tugboat!" she said. "You must look at it, admiral. You who are a navy man."

The admiral groaned. He did not want to look at anything and certainly not at a dumpy tug.

"Lovely," he answered. "It looks like a fat woman sitting down."

Victor Ramsen and I smiled through our pain and Mary started to say "Incorrigible," but desisted, not being sure perhaps how it is pronounced. So she said "Wicked" instead.

I trust that I am not portraying my stepsister too unfavorably or with malice. I dislike her, but at the same time I wish to do her justice, for it is possible that my dislike is unwarranted—possible, but not probable. She is one of those unfortunate women who are compounded of major but unavailing virtues and of minor but insufferable faults. Mary's virtues are as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar—good, Christian virtues too, such as are most highly recommended by the best ecclesiastical authorities. But of what advantage is it, for instance, to

love one's neighbor as oneself if one constantly irritates one's neighbor while doing it? And that is the way with Mary. It is good women like her that make the world miserable.

At Flushing, I believe, we had a glimpse of an expanse of water large enough to cause Hector Ramsen to point it out with a triumphant cry.

"Thalassa!" he exclaimed in his best Greek, and looked as proud as Cyrus' army. It happened to be merely Flushing Bay, but we could smell the salt and there was a sea breeze, so even the admiral forgave him. Mary wanted to know how far Thalassa was from Manhasset.

As we neared Huntington the air grew pleasantly cooler, the admiral recovered something of his equanimity and we our appetites. Hector Ramsen guided the chauffeur to the inn where we had arranged to meet George and Annabel. Their roadster, a sporty canary-colored affair, stood beside the door. How long they had been there I do not know, but I inferred that it had been a considerable time. However, they did not seem bored by waiting, and we found them seated beside each other at a table laid for seven, talking in that careless manner which indicates that the conversation is born and not made.



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Annabel, I must add, was looking very well in a gray tailored suit and a small black straw hat with a white feather in it. I reflected that simple, quiet clothes became her, and then I reflected that simple, quiet clothes become all women if they but knew it. But women, as I am not the first to remark, are strange creatures. They dress avowedly to please men, and yet they ignore men's opinions and tastes in the clothes they wear. I have yet to see a woman who does not look well in black and a string of pearls, but in the majority of cases one would have to kill off some dear relation to force them into the black. None of them, I concede, balks at the string of pearls.

## CHAPTER V

**W**E lunched on the terrace overlooking the sound. The boughs of a horse-chestnut tree sheltered us from the sun and all about us were green shrubs, some in bloom and visited by bees, some past their blooming but still redolent of the fragrance that had once been theirs. There was just enough breeze stirring to waft an occasional leaf or petal into the fish plates and the salad. Yes, in all that weary, nerve-racking day, that luncheon stands out in my memory as the one bright spot.

George, I noted, was unwontedly quiet. Perhaps he viewed the future and the prospect of Deborah with alarm. There was a pathos in his eyes such as one sees in those of dogs or—I imagine—of sacrificial lambs, though I have never viewed a sacrificial lamb.

We all endeavored to rally him from his despondency, Annabel alone evincing little interest in his condition. My stepsister, Mary, once she had eaten adequately, settled back in her chair with a long, fat sigh and said to Hector Ramsen: "Now, Professor Ramsen, you must

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tell us more about Miss Deborah. Annabel and I are so excited."

"I'm not in the least excited," said Annabel carelessly, "so don't blame your own curiosity on your young."

"That's just Annabel's way of talking," her mother explained generously. "She won't admit she has any emotions at all."

"A cold-hearted blonde, eh?" observed George. "Poised to flee like Deborah."

Mary pricked up her ears at this.

"Poised to flee?" she repeated. "What do you mean, George, by poised to flee? I see there's some mystery here that I'm out of."

The admiral, now fully recovered, undertook to explain.

"It seems," he said, "that this Deborah is like a fleeing nymph, according to the professor at least. She's like Daphne or somebody who was pursued by Apollo or somebody. Daphne, they say, put on full speed ahead and cried, 'I won't give up the ship!' But just then she broke a propeller or something and it looked as if she'd have to lower her flag. Fortunately, however, she turned into a laurel tree just in time."

Mary lowered her eyes modestly to her empty plate and I'll vow that she blushed, and this at

her age—forty-eight. I claim that it was inexcusable of her—low-minded, as if one should blush at a Botticelli or a Rubens. What was worse, she glanced at Annabel, doubtless to make certain that Annabel also was blushing correctly. But in that she was disappointed, for Annabel had the decency to keep her eyes up and to maintain her even, delicate color. I like the way young girls behave to-day—if only they wouldn't giggle. Still their mothers, I remember, giggled and simpered, and their grandmothers fainted. Yes, we have improved.

“As the admiral recounts it,” said the professor, “the legend of Daphne is graceful and as delicate as peach bloom. But he does not, I fear, quite interpret my meaning. What I meant to convey was simply that Deborah Peters is not quiescent—she is evanescent, fugitive, whatever you choose to call it. She is always moving—like a brook. Moving mentally and spiritually as well as physically.”

“A restless sort of person,” said Mary.

“She keeps bees,” murmured George.

I noticed that Annabel cast him a curious sort of glance, as if she laid some importance to the tone in which this trivial remark was made. She wanted, I think, to make certain that George was deliberately facetious; but she needn't have

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worried about George, for he would be facetious even at the altar—unwontedly facetious perhaps at the altar.

“There’s not much money in bees,” remarked Victor Ramsen. Then he added ruminatively: “I don’t suppose her father makes much out of being a professor of chemistry either. Let’s say four thousand a year and a thousand more from the bees and the chickens and the other truck. No, not very much. I wonder how they live? How do they live, Hector?”

“Simply, with dignity. The father, Professor Peters, is a very able man. He experimented for the Government during the war.”

“So did a lot of poor fools,” retorted Victor brutally, “and look what it cost us.”

Victor, the business man, is and always has been vehemently opposed to whatever administration is in power.

“The trouble is,” he went on, “we have too many experimenters and too few men who know their jobs. That’s why we’ve bungled everything—and we’ll always bungle everything as long as we’re a democracy. The rule of the unfit—that’s all a democracy is. Give me a benevolent tyranny—give me Augustus, Louis XIV or Elizabeth and I’ll give you a nation that amounts to something!”

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The admiral, who had been growing restless, interrupted to remark that he couldn't give him any of those people, but that he would give him a glass of brandy if he'd keep quiet. Mary began collecting things, or rather began to think of collecting things, preparatory to departure. Mary has to do a great many things before she does anything, and that is why she is always starting early and arriving late. Moreover, she insisted on annoying Annabel, who never hurries unnecessarily and who now was placidly eating a peach.

"Annabel, dear, don't forget your gloves."

"I shan't, mother," said Annabel.

"And perhaps if we've finished George will help you with your dust coat."

Annabel agreed that perhaps George would, but continued with the peach.

"Where did you put your road book?"

"Well," said Annabel, "it may be in my stocking with my money, but somehow I don't think it is."

"Really, Annabel, you—you talk like a girl of the stage. I'm sure I don't know what people must think. Isn't she awful, Foster?"

"Don't appeal to me," I protested. "I am one of Annabel's most loyal worshipers. I've idolized her ever since she was born and I've yet

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to observe a touch of clay about her. She's gold all through—just like her hair."

"I love you, Uncle Foster," said Annabel. "You're the nicest man I know."

"Praise from the idol is praise indeed," I said.

"Ugh!" said George disgustedly. "Cheap stuff! You ought to have a moon and a Renaissance fountain to get away with that."

I think he was annoyed, for he got up and made for the runabout without further words.

## CHAPTER VI

**W**E reached Sun Harbor at an hour when the sun was leaving it, but the smell of dead fish still lingered. It is an odor that in Sun Harbor will never die. You get something similar at Gloucester, or even in the vicinity of Gloucester, when the tide is low and the wind is right. Personally I do not dislike the smell—a little of it, I mean, and well seasoned with salt.

Sun Harbor was merely a fishing village and, unlike many of the former fishing villages of Long Island, it had never become fashionable. It had not even become artistic—that is to say, it was not thronged with mad, shabby actors and artists. The houses belonged to slothful fishermen and to lazy farmers. They were not ornate; they had not been remodeled; they were not—except at dusk—picturesque. None of them had been utilized, so far as I know, as a setting for a musical comedy actress in order to emphasize her simple, home-loving nature. Movie stars had never romped on the front



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lawns in riding breeches with a troupe of hired colliers. Lady authors had not been photographed completing Chapter Fourteen under the maples, and the chaste pines and oaks that go to make up Thatcher's Woods had never, I am certain, been stirred by barefooted dancers. No, Sun Harbor was neither distinguished nor notorious.

The village was built along the crescent-shaped shore of a small bay. It was built without plan or pattern and the streets wandered at will, those leading inland rising with the slope of ground for about half a mile. At that point they became mere country lanes bordered by farms—truck farms for the most part. Beyond the stretch of farm land was Thatcher's Woods, whose virginal quality I have already referred to. Beyond Thatcher's Woods was heaven knows what; I never cared to penetrate farther.

The inn which Hector Ramsen had selected as suitable for our habitation stood at a crossroads just outside the village. It was called the Hoffman Arms. I wonder why Hoffman and arms seem to go together so frequently in the names of inns, though the owner is never called Hoffman, and if he were, his arms would probably be unattractive. However, our inn was called the Hoffman Arms. I don't know when it was

built or who built it, and I do not care to know. It was a deplorable example of whatever architectural period it belonged to. It was gloomy, dark, forlorn. It had a musty, unaired smell, and a damp feel about it. It reminded me of a country poorhouse or an old ladies' home in disrepair.

When I first set foot within it I gathered that there must have been—and that there very likely still was—a plague of flies and mosquitoes against which the owner had to contend. Everything, at all events, was protected from these insects with scrupulous care. There were screens and nettings everywhere—the porch, the windows, the doors were screened; the chromos on the walls were covered with white netting; the chandeliers were swathed in red netting; there was a sort of netting cage over the vinegar and oil bottles on the dining-room table. That the landlord's tactics were not limited to defensive operations, moreover, was amply proved by innumerable corpses of his enemies that adorned the fly papers. Fly paper and netting were the dominant notes in the decorative scheme; and where there was no space for either of them, little saucers filled with poisoned liquid lay to trap the enemy. Truly it was war to the death, and I have no doubt that

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The Hague Conventions were disregarded freely by both sides.

George met us as we drove up. He had been there twenty minutes and was extremely gloomy. Annabel, he explained was somewhere behind the fly screens.

"This is a devil of a place," he whispered to me. "You'll never be able to stand it."

"We mustn't hurt Hector's feelings," I whispered back. "He thinks it's very nice here."

But the others of our party—Mary and the admiral in particular—were not so considerate of the poor professor.

"Dear me," said Mary, "is this where we are to stay?"

Hector replied beamingly that it was.

"It is primitive," he added, "but I have found it very soothing. I have passed many peaceful hours in the old inn."

"Where's the inscription?" asked the admiral crossly.

"The inscription?"

"Yes. When you or George Washington or Lafayette sleep anywhere don't they always put up a tablet?"

But Asa, our chauffeur, was the most brutal. He took one scornful, sweeping glance at the


place and refused point-blank to pass a night under the roof.

"Not for me," he said. "It's all right for you folks if yuh like that sorta thing. But not for me. I ain't used to it. But don't worry," he continued magnanimously, "I'll just drive on to the first decent town where I can get a room and bath; and if yuh want I'll come back with the car in the morning. Besides there ain't no garage or movies or nothing. This place is dead—yes, sir, dead. No, not for me."

That was his ultimatum, and he backed it up with the awful threat of resigning his job. Of course we couldn't think of permitting him to do that, for he was very satisfactory and had been with us for eight years; so when he had assisted us to unload the hand baggage we bade him farewell for the night and watched him speed away to some far paradise where there were movies and porcelain tubs. Servants, I suppose, must be kept in the luxury to which they have been accustomed.

Then we entered the Hoffman Arms.

Apparently Hector Ramsen had chartered almost the entire place for our accommodation, or else few others cared to visit it, for the only other guest was an old lady with a few teeth and a rich bass voice. She sat rocking amid the



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nettings and fly paper in the dark parlor and she rumbled something incoherent at us as we filed by. Hector waved at her cheerily and explained that she was a little feeble-minded, but came out occasionally with some startlingly original remarks.

The landlord—Mr. Hoffman, I suppose—emerged from some place in the rear to greet us. He was in shirt sleeves and suspenders and looked very dirty and hot and moist. He did not seem particularly pleased to see us, though he admitted that the professor had engaged the rooms and that the rooms were ready.

“I’ll show you up if you want,” he concluded. “There’s seven of you, I guess, ain’t there?”

“Yes,” said the admiral grimly, “we are seven. I only hope some one of us will live to tell about it.”

The landlord ignored this and led the way up the stairs. There were four rooms on the first floor, with use of bath, and three rooms on the second, likewise with use of bath. The feeble-minded old lady occupied the fourth room on this latter floor, but the landlord assured us she would not interfere, as she never bathed.

We disposed of ourselves as well as we could, my stepsister rendering the disposition the more arduous through her inability to make up


her mind as to which of the seven rooms she preferred.

"No sunlight, but plenty of company in bed," was the admiral's comment on the quarters assigned to him. I admit that there was probably reason in his remark. However, there we were and the chauffeur gone—our only means of retreat cut off. What were we to do but make the best of it?

Annabel, I must say, behaved like a trump. True, she shivered a bit at first sight of her room, but thereafter she managed somehow to maintain a cheerfulness of disposition that shamed the rest of us into at least silent discontent. I except, of course, Hector Ramsen, who was cheerful throughout.

Supper, we discovered, was served at half-past six and, moreover, was served at but one large table. This resulted in the feeble-minded old lady becoming a member of our party. We put her between Hector and George, but as a recompense to my nephew we allowed him Annabel on his left.

The old lady, whose name was Mrs. Jenks, babbled along harmlessly but rather incoherently. Eating nothing that required mastication, she did very well by the soup, the mashed potatoes and the crushed parsnips, and she



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came back three times, as George noted and informed us, for the cabinet pudding.

"Well, I declare," she said, "it's nice to see company round. I like old men too, they're so chivalrous. And the pretty young girl—just like me at her age. Youth is the golden age, my dear—it just matches your hair."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jenks," said Annabel nicely.

"And the young man here," continued Mrs. Jenks, pointing at George with a parsnip-laden fork, "is he your young man?"

George squirmed a little—with vexation, I suppose—but answered pleasantly enough: "No, I'm nobody's young man so far. Sometimes, though, I imagine I hear the baying of the hounds."

"What's that?" said Mrs. Jenks sharply. "What's that?"

"Nothing," said George; "just a feeble attempt at wit."

"And very feeble too," said Mrs. Jenks. "My husband was a wit, and all that I am I owe to him. He's dead now, in the cemetery, with the daisies and the buttercups and all the lovely flowers over him; and he wore side whiskers. So I'm a widow. Why don't you marry, young man?"

"Must I?" murmured George.

"Yes, you must. Marry and have seven children and all of them ungrateful. And when you've buried them all you can say that you've done your duty in this world of sin and sorrow."

At this the admiral, who had been listening intently, turned to me and remarked in a loud whisper that there was nothing feeble about her mind.

"Would you raise seven children for cannon fodder?" said Mary, who had been quiet too long.

"What's that?" said Mrs. Jenks. "What's that?"

My stepsister repeated the phrase that she had doubtless culled from a pamphlet.

"Cannon fodder? What's cannon fodder? I don't know these new foods. My teeth aren't what they used to be. Bessie, I think I'll have a little more of the parsnips."

Bessie, the waitress, placed another canary's bathtubful of the vegetable beside Mrs. Jenks' plate.

"It's nice to have company, isn't it, Bessie?" said the old lady. "Sort of gives me an appetite."

"Yes'm," agreed Bessie. "You do be eatin' better, I think."





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"Did you all come just to see me?" Mrs. Jenks inquired.

Hector ventured to explain that she was not the sole object of our visit. He said something about rest and recreation and his good friend Professor Peters.

"And a very unpleasant man he is too," she said to our amazement. "He and that hussy of a daughter. I hate them like fly poison."

She said this with such conviction that I am sure she must have tasted fly poison at some time during her sojourn at the Hoffman Arms. We were all greatly startled—all except Hector, who tapped his forehead surreptitiously. Annabel put her astonishment into words, demanding the reason for such intense hatred.

"What's that?" asked Mrs. Jenks.

"Why do you hate them?" said Annabel. "And why do you call the daughter a hussy?"

"Because," said Mrs. Jenks, "because I hate what I hate and I call a hussy a hussy. In my day I never went round naked."

"Now, please," soothed Hector, aggrieved.

"God forbid, madam!" cried the admiral, by now highly amused.

"Well, he did forbid," said Mrs. Jenks, "and if he hadn't I wouldn't have anyway. Swimming in the ocean up to the beach in the moon-

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light—that's what she did—and Silas Thatcher and all the fishes looking at her. And she as naked as the day she was born—not so much as a shirt. Bessie, I'll have a little of the cabinet pudding."

My stepsister rose aghast and left the room, motioning violently for Annabel to follow. But Annabel said "Don't be silly, mother," and, like Mrs. Jenks, ordered some more cabinet pudding.



## CHAPTER VII

**I**T had been arranged that we were to call in a body on Professor Peters and Deborah after supper. Hector had arranged it. "Do you think we ought to attack like that in mass formation?" George had ventured. "Wouldn't it be apt to frighten the nymph?"

"No," Hector had answered seriously; "it will be quite all right. I have arranged everything.

"So it appears," George had said ungraciously—"so it appears."

But even if George did not look forward greatly to the evening, I am sure that the rest of us did. Though George was the hero of the piece, he was on that very account the only one of us expected to play an active rôle. George was expected to fall in love and declare his passion almost before our very eyes. I will admit that he had reason to be stage frightened.

In pursuance of his plan, Hector marshaled us together soon after supper. Mrs. Jenks was rocking comfortably in the front parlor, reading

some religious weekly and making it evident that we were not expected to linger to entertain her further. Hector led the way to the Peters house, we following two by two, even as the animals entering the Ark. George and Annabel were the first pair, and neither of them seemed at all in haste.

Fortunately we had not far to go—perhaps a quarter of a mile of dusty road—and then we turned into Professor Peters' gate. In the twilight we had a glimpse of a rather unkempt garden, with a low, rambling white farmhouse behind it—a house apparently rebuilt and added to by various successive owners, and added to so frequently that it was difficult to tell just which part was the original. It was an attractive place, especially in the dim light. In the broad sun one would have been more struck by its untidiness, for untidiness was surely its chief defect; the chief defect, I mean, from an æsthetic point of view. There were other and graver defects which I shall have occasion to dwell upon later.

The garden was really lovely, color piled against color in confusion. No symmetry there, no careful clipping, very little weeding, but the effect was excellent and left me for one a little breathless. It was like a forsaken garden, ex-

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cept for the abundance of bloom. It was beautiful and yet depressing.

As we came two by two up the grass path, the sun dipped red behind the hills and the land was flooded with a warm afterglow that tinted the sunflowers with orange. The air was heavy with the scent of the multitude of flowers and overhead the salt sea breeze stirred the tree tops gently and persistently. Not far away we were aware of the ocean murmuring on the beach. It was a night for loving. I am sure there was no one of us that failed to sense it, and there were five of us, I am sure, that sighed and wished for our youth. Even my stepsister seemed subdued. I wonder if she was not regretting Willie McKnight, for all his uncertain temper and temperament.

There was no word spoken, no suggestion made, but of accord we loitered on our way to the house. We loitered and inhaled the fragrance of the garden, and I recalled the poets who had hymned such gardens as this—Shelley and Swinburne and Tennyson—and I went so far as to compose a line or two of my own, something—which I later elaborated—about the transitoriness of beauty and the brief span allotted us in which to love and to live. I remember that, becoming interested in my composition, I

stepped apart from the others the better to think of a dignified rime to lily.

As I advanced toward the house, lights glowed out in some of the windows, and presently a door opened and I saw a dim figure come forth with a lantern. I looked back over my shoulder at the others of the party and perceived that they were standing as I had left them, talking together in subdued voices, reluctant to leave the evening. So I gathered my wits and, feeling an explanation due to the bearer of the lantern, stepped forward to present it as well as I might.

"Pardon me," I began, and then I saw that the lantern bearer was a young girl.

She raised the lantern so that it lighted my face and, more important to me, so that it lighted hers. She was very beautiful.

"Oh," she said, "I wondered if perhaps you were Professor Ramsen."

"The professor," I explained, "is yonder with some friends. We have stayed to enjoy the beauty of your garden and I'm afraid we've been trespassing. May I presume that you are Miss Deborah Peters?"

"Yes, I am Deborah Peters."

"And I am Foster Langley. Shall I take the lantern?"

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"Oh, no; I am going to hang it on the gate. We always hang a lantern at the gate if we expect visitors. It helps them find their way to the house in the dark, you see, and it keeps them from tramping on the garden and tripping over the morning-glories. Come, we will go together."

She put out her hand with the confidence of a child that it would be taken. I did not naturally betray that confidence, but I wondered what the others would think of our appearance hand in hand. I reflected that I was possibly a little too old to appear boyish and at the same time a little too young to appear paternal or—well, I could not by any stretch of the imagination have been taken for her grandfather. That is the great drawback, I find, to middle age. You are neither one thing nor the other. If you try to pretend you are young, you look silly and absurd, and if you fall back on a grandfatherly attitude, you might as well resign from the game of life and enter a monkery. Either alternative is displeasing.

We advanced, I say then, hand in hand. Her hand was slim and cool, but it was not a weak, soft hand. Its clutch on mine was firm. She swung the lantern rhythmically as we walked, throwing the light now ahead of us, now behind

us, now at our feet. She was right about the morning-glories. Their tendrils had curled themselves greedily about everything they could reach and, uncurbed, they had reached the path. Without the light we should have been sure to trample them. Hector stepped out of the dusk to meet her.

"My dear," he said, "I have brought my friends, as I promised you—and two more that I did not promise you, but who I'm sure will be very welcome. Is your father in the house?"

"No," said she, "father is in the laboratory. He told me to call him when you arrived."

The professor performed the necessary introductions. Deborah—of course she had released my hand—bowed gravely to the men and gravely but shyly, I thought, to the women. Then she turned and we followed her into the house. On the way Annabel seized my arm.

"I couldn't see her face very well," she said, "but I'm convinced that she is a beauty. She carries herself like a beauty—a beauty probably without corsets. What do you think, Uncle Foster? You seem to have got to know her quickly."

"Annabel," I answered, "I think you are quite right. There is no doubt of it at all—she is beautiful. But she's a mere child."



Annabel was silent for a brief space, and then: "I'll bet you she's older than I," she said.

"I know," I agreed, "but you're only a child yourself—a very wise child though. You have eaten of the tree of knowledge and you have the wisdom of centuries of women."

"Yes," said Annabel; "and she, I suppose, scorns even the fig leaf. I wonder just what Mrs. Jenks meant."

"Heavens!" I exclaimed. "As if you or I or anyone else knew what Mrs. Jenks meant!"

"Just the same I'd like to know," said Annabel. "I think we should know everything about this Deborah Peters before we risk poor George to her."

This gave me to think—if I may translate a foreign idiom. I am self-confessedly stupid in affairs of the heart, but no man can live to my age and not know the elementary rules. Was it possible that Annabel was jealous of Deborah? If not, then why this extreme and rather recent interest in shielding poor George? And why her insistence on accompanying us to Sun Harbor? I pondered, but I reached no definite conclusion save that we should have to tread cautiously lest we trample a flower.

## CHAPTER VIII

**T**HE low, rambling farmhouse was an extraordinary dwelling—not architecturally, for I have seen many similar, but in its interior arrangement and decoration. What I took to be the original building had been converted on the ground floor into one large room—one enormous room in fact—and rendered more so in appearance by the lowness of the ceiling. This ceiling rested on heavy wooden beams, and upon the removal of the partitions when the room had been widened these beams had of necessity been supported by uprights placed at intervals of about eight feet. The uprights were simply small tree trunks with the bark and in many cases the lopped-off geneses of their branches still on them. From these stumps of branches hung baskets of flowering vines, which seemingly clambered at will down to the floor and up to the ceiling. It gave the effect of a pergola, but for living purposes—well, I should about as soon have lived in a greenhouse. The impression of a greenhouse, moreover, was fostered by the fact that the back

of this room—the south side—consisted entirely of a series of wide French windows. Cold in winter and hot in summer, I reflected.

The furnishing of the room was as bizarre as its arrangement, but here the decorator, whoever he was, had been eminently successful. It was an interesting color scheme well executed and richly executed; russet browns, greens and golden yellows—the color of a forest in the summer or early fall. And those colors were piled on thick, one beside the other, one on top of the other, just as they are in Nature. It was startling, but it was good.

“How do you like the room?” asked Deborah when she saw our obvious amazement.


“It isn’t a room,” I said. “It’s all outdoors.”

My stepsister went into cooing paroxysms of appreciation. She was heard to gasp several times that it was “too wonderful” and “simply delicious.” Annabel said nothing. She was looking at Deborah, not at the room. And George and the admiral were looking at Deborah. She was engaged in lighting an additional lamp—a tall lamp—and the glow from it descended on her, circling her like an aureole. I wrote “aureole” unthinkingly, but I now see why. Her head was very similar to that of Bouguereau’s famous Madonna—the same

regularity of feature, the finely rounded face, the large, wistful eyes, the smooth, lustrous hair, the rather sensuous mouth. I do not admire Bouguereau's Madonna; there is too much of the flesh about her and too little of the spirit. Doubtless the artist painted the most beautiful woman he knew, but that is exactly what he painted and no more. Deborah resembled her, I say—resembled her physically at least. What lay within Deborah's large, wistful eyes we none of us could judge at that time; nor could we tell if she had a soul to wake or a heart to break.

"I will fetch father," said Deborah when she had lighted the lamp.

She passed among us the length of the room toward a door at the end. She walked freely and easily and so noiselessly that I instinctively glanced down at her feet. So, I am sure, did Mary and Annabel. She wore little black, heelless Japanese slippers—satin, I think, with felt soles—but she wore no stockings. There was not a trace of immodesty about it to my mind and—more extraordinary—there was not a trace of vulgarity, perhaps because her legs were slim and young and perfectly modeled. As a rule, however, I prefer stockings; and it was obvious that Mary always does, for she emitted



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a little scream which she unsuccessfully endeavored to transform into a cough.

Mary should be kept in the nursery. Still there are plenty of bare legs there to shock her, I suppose.

Fortunately Deborah appeared completely unaware of the emotion she had created. I recalled Hector Ramsen's phrase descriptive of her—"Like a nymph—poised to flee"—and I knew that he had spoken truly. She had a nymph's unselfconsciousness, her spontaneity, her gayety and all of her timidity. She was poised to flee should danger, real or imagined, threaten; and she was unable to distinguish between the real danger and the imagined—unable until too late. That is the way with nymphs.

"Isn't she amazing!" exclaimed Hector Ramsen when she had shut the door behind her. He spoke as a proud father might speak of his first-born—as though indeed he thought himself deserving of a part of the credit for her amazingness.

"She is poetry," I said; "natural, simple, beautiful poetry like Keats'."

"But——" began Mary.

"But nothing, Mary!" I interrupted. "If she doesn't choose to wear stockings it's none of our business."

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Like the girls at the Winter Garden," said Isabel sweetly, so sweetly in fact that I fear intended the comparison to convey its sting. Any rate I saw her cast a quick, brief look at George.

But George surprised us all. He went quickly to the professor, shook his hand warmly and said: "She's all right." And again he repeated the same thing and with great emphasis: "She's all right."

His, I suppose, was the highest tribute ever paid a woman. These modern, uncomplimentary young men are strange beings. I do not understand just why the women in love with them; for women, I have noticed—all women, young, old, deaf, blind or dumb—like to be told in glowing terms just how wonderful they are, and they like to be told it even at breakfast—and they always believe it. Moreover—and I am now divulging a very valuable secret—an ugly woman likes especially to be told that she is beautiful. She may be everything but beautiful, she may be a large Eliot, but even then she likes to be told she is a Maxine Elliott. God bless them, I say, keep them as they are!



## CHAPTER IX

**D**EBORAH returned shortly leading her father by the hand. He was a strange, vague little man, restless as a canary in a cage. He reminded me of a bird for some reason—I scarcely know why. Perhaps his thin legs and his plump body. His eyes, I am sure, were birds' eyes, but they were completely hidden behind large blue spectacles. He was very untidy and his fingers were stained brown from his chemicals. Altogether he did not make a favorable impression on me, nor of course on Mary. Indeed it was painfully evident that Mary disapproved highly of our venture—of the Peters' house and everything within it.

I think that Hector Ramsen and George were the only ones among the visitors who were thoroughly enjoying the visit. The admiral was growing sleepy, Victor Ramsen was bored—the whole affair was so unbusinesslike—and I fancied that Annabel was not especially pleased with George's attitude. She would have liked George to be bored too.

But George was frankly enjoying himself. He

greeted Professor Peters most cordially and plunged into a discussion of poison gases. The eminent chemist, it seemed, had been experimenting for the Government during the war; and the war now being at an end and the need of absolute secrecy no longer existent, he was delighted—almost childishly delighted—to tell us all about it.

“Yes, Mr.—er—I forget your name—you will pardon me?”

“Coventry,” supplied George.

“Mr. Coventry—of course. Yes, Mr. Coventry, I am convinced—convinced, I say—that I have at last the deadly, annihilating mixture that all the scientific men have been searching for. I have the insidious weapon with which to destroy entire armies; and I have it, sir—I have it in a highly concentrated form. One shell filled with my formula will upon explosion wipe out half a million men. Why? Do you know why?”

“No—why?” murmured George.

“Ah, that’s it! Well, sir, it’s because this gas not only is highly concentrated but it spreads with lightning rapidity. Men may turn and flee from it, but it will overtake them. It travels faster than the wind—except of course a very fast wind, and then it travels just as



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fast; and, mark you, with almost undiminished power. One of my gas shells will kill every living thing on a space four miles square."

"Why square?" asked the admiral, stifling a yawn.

"Round, if you will," conceded the chemist generously. "Shall we say round? One shell then will exterminate every living thing within a circle whose diameter is four miles. And it will make anybody even in the vicinity of that circle violently ill—actively ill, if I may say so. A triumph, gentlemen, a veritable triumph—but alas, too late!"

"Surely not, Professor Peters," interjected Annabel—"surely not too late. Such a wonderfully valuable contribution to progress is never too late."

"In a way you are of course right," agreed Professor Peters. "But the war is over and there is no one left to kill. It is, if I may say so, unfortunate."

"I shouldn't worry," the admiral observed. "There are children growing up every day. In ten or twelve years there will be plenty of men to kill."

The chemist shook his head sadly.

"I fear I shall not live to see the day," he said. "I am an old man. My years are num-

bered. I shall not live to witness my triumph."

"Oh, professor," cooed my stepsister, who always entered with interest into a conversation about death—"oh, professor, you must not say that! You're a young man still—just in your prime."

"Thank you, Mrs.—er—I forget the name. Will you pardon me?"


"Mrs. McKnight," said Mary, and returned avidly to the subject of death.

George, I noted, had withdrawn slightly from the center of the group and was talking to Deborah, who was seated on a cushion on the floor—on a cushion and on her left foot if my surmise is correct. I have often wondered why girls sit so often on one of their feet and how they manage it. Deborah managed it with ease and grace. She was very supple.

The subject of their conversation I could not hear, for naturally it was carried on in undertones lest we others be disturbed. But George told me later that it was mostly about bees. You remember, do you not, that Deborah kept bees?

"She knows all about them," George told me later. "It seems that bees are much more important than I had imagined."

"Yes," I murmured, "there was Fabre and Maeterlinck."



"Oh," he interrupted, "they're only nature fakirs. Deborah really understands them. She ought to write a book on them herself."

It appears that Deborah had entertained George with a very learned and polished discourse.

"Keeping bees," she had begun, "is one of the oldest occupations in the world. The Greeks and the Romans write enthusiastically of bee farming. You remember Virgil's Georgics, for instance."

No, George had not read Virgil's Georgics, but he could not fail to be astonished that she had.

"Oh, you must read them," she urged. "Professor Ramsen and I read them aloud to each other very often."

"In the Latin?" George inquired.

"Why, yes," she said with a touch of surprise in her voice. "Professor Ramsen taught me both Greek and Latin years and years ago. We have such wonderful times together. Now that you are here, you must join us and we'll all take turns reading. The professor promised to bring down a new book with him to-day too—something by Plautus, I think, called *Asinaria*. Have you read it?"

No, George had not read Plautus' *Asinaria*.

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"I'm not surprised," she said. "One can't read everything."

"Tell me more about the bees," suggested George. "How many of the little rascals have you got?"

"About eighty thousand of them. We have a beautiful queen. This is her second year with us and we're very fond of her indeed. I hope she will last for another year."

"What do you mean by a beautiful queen? Do you mean you can recognize her when you see her?"

"Of course," she said—"of course; anyone can recognize the queen. There's only one of her in a colony, you see. The drones are another matter—there are a hundred or so of them. But of course they are put out of the hive as soon as the mating season is over. They're such useless creatures—no work and always eating. Heavens, how they eat!"

"I take it," said George, "that they're the gentleman bees."

"Yes—and they're just like the men I read about. Now the workers—the worker bee, that's the type I admire. We have about eighty thousand of them, as I told you. They are simply wonderful."

"All of the eighty thousand?"

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"All of them," she answered with conviction.

"What sex are they?"

"Oh, they? Why, they're neuters, I suppose. But they know everything. They are governors, lawmakers, architects and policemen."

"Good Lord," said George, "I'll bet they die young!"

"They live about six or seven weeks only."

"What is their politics?" George inquired.

She did not laugh.

"Socialists," she said seriously. "The drones are the capitalists—they live on the labor of others."

"How about the jolly old queen?"

"Oh, she's a producer! She lays as many as three thousand eggs in twenty-four hours. If it weren't for her there wouldn't be any workers and therefore no honey."

"Um!" said George. "I see that you don't hand the drones any credit at all. You evidently don't admire men."

"Oh, indeed I do—some men. Father and Professor Ramsen, for instance."

"But nothing younger than that?" George persisted.

"Well, you see, I scarcely know any men younger than that. I don't see many people down here and I never go away. I think you're

ry nice, though. Are all young men as nice you?"

"Don't you believe it!" said George sturdily. "I'm a shining exception—I'm unique."

"I thought so," she murmured without a smile.

Shortly after that, according to George, we dragged him away. Mary gave the signal, seconded by Annabel. Hector alone remained, as he said, to converse further with Professor Peters. He was perfectly contented with the evening, but the women-folk were evidently ill at ease. Women in some ways are much more conventional, I find, than men, and are much more disturbed by unconventional trifles. In spite of what I am told, I refuse to believe that they are the more adaptable sex—especially the American women. Place, for example, an average woman between a duchess and a chorus girl. She will be completely awed by the one and she will patronize the other, but she will be afraid of them both. On the other hand, place an average man between a duke and a dock hand and he will get along famously. That is because he will not be self-conscious and because in this democracy of ours it is mainly the men who are democratic. The women all strive to be aristocrats.

## CHAPTER X

**T**HAT night before we went to our unattractive beds George came into my room. I could see that he wanted to talk or be talked to—that he was a little upset.

“Well,” he said, lighting a cigarette and seating himself on the bed—“well, Uncle Foster, what do you think of that bunch?”

“You mean Professor Peters and daughter? It’s hard to judge on such a short acquaintance. What do you think yourself?”

“Huh,” grunted George, “that’s not much of an answer to my question. Still if you want to know what I think—I think the professor is crazy and the daughter’s first rate. She may be crazy too, but if she is she’s a lovely lunatic.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “she’s quite lovely.”

George yawned and stretched on the bed.

“Hector Ramsen, it seems, has taught her to read Greek and Latin. He’s known her a long time. They’re very thick.”

“That’s probably where he’s been spending all his week-ends,” I said. “He was never very specific about them.”

"She seems very fond of him," said George.

"In a daughterly way?" I ventured.

"Damned if I know," said George. "He's all of fifty-two, isn't he?"

"He's only fifty-three," I corrected.

"I beg your pardon," said George, smiling.

"Well, it's none of my business."

"Just what is none of your business?" I inquired. "Hector's age?"


"No," answered George brutally; "Hector's affairs of the heart."

I confess that this surprised me.

"Why, George," I said, "who's crazy now? Didn't Hector bring you down here on purpose to present you to Deborah Peters? You don't mean to say you believe for an instant that he himself—that he—er—is himself enamored?"

"I didn't say so," George answered, smothering another yawn. "But," he added after an interval, "he never took his jolly old eyes off her all evening, though. Every time I looked at him he had those spectacles of his focused on the specimen."

I was disturbed. What if George were correct? What if Hector Ramsen, perhaps unconsciously or subconsciously, were in love with the delectable Deborah? I foresaw complications, the more so because I had no reason not to be-





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lieve that George, equipped with youth, would very shortly eclipse that genial and gentle Hector in the heart of Deborah. And then the catastrophe when—too late—poor Hector should realize that he had lost that which unwittingly he had been seeking this long time. However, I determined to jump at no conclusions and to borrow no trouble. After all I was not an arbiter of destiny. I could but sit back in the rôle of an interested spectator and hope that the piece would be a pleasant comedy rather than a tragedy.

“Well,” said George, “I guess I’ll get along to bed. I’m getting up early to-morrow.”

“Ah!”

“Say ‘ah’ all you want,” he conceded. “I’m doing my duty—I’m doing what I was brought down here to do. I’m going for a walk and a swim with Miss Deborah Peters, and at sunrise. It seems that’s her hour.”

“Very well, George,” I said. “I see no harm in that.”

But George shook his head gloomily.

“Perhaps not,” he said, “perhaps not. But it may lead to worse. It may be the beginning of the end. Still as long as you are all so set on marrying me off—well, I am a soldier, a brave soldier, and I can but obey. Orders is

orders. Noble six hundred, you know. Good night, Uncle Foster. I'm glad we came, aren't you?"

With that he left me, and I thought I detected the trace of a sardonic grin on his face as he closed the door. I wondered. Was my nephew plotting some subtle, insidious vengeance against us? Did he—and perhaps with some reason—resent having been made more or less of a pawn in the game of four middle-aged gentlemen? Doubtless we had gone about this marriage business in the wrong way—you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Well, we had led the horse to water, and it was possible that the horse, suspecting that one of us was thirsty, would out of spite drink up all the water in the trough. An unpleasant state of affairs truly.

And Annabel? Almost I had forgotten Annabel and the suspicions that she had roused in me. If she were in love with George—no, it became too involved. I could not consider it further.

Reluctant to enter my bed, I took a volume of *Les Misérables* from my suitcase. That book always cheers me, because it is so cheerless. Poor Jean Valjean suffers so much more than I ever did, do or shall that, reading of his suf-

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ferings, I become completely contented with my condition. Especially cheering do I find the portions devoted to the lives of the galley slaves, and I heartily recommend those portions to anyone who—with or without cause—is unduly depressed.

Of course in a way we are all galley slaves driven by an unseen whip. Whenever we violate any of the regulations that whip goes crackling across our backs, and the little stolen pleasure we have obtained is forgotten in the anguish of the increased pain. And always we must pull our oar. That is the worst of it. In order to live we must pull our oar. Sometimes I wonder why we are willing to suffer so much in order to live, for what is life? A little dust lit by a spark—that's the beginning. And then what? The sudden joys and the deep short sorrows of youth; the moderate joys and the deeper and longer sorrows of middle age; and finally the joys and sorrows of old age, so mingled and interwoven one with the other as to be almost indistinguishable. And then what? A few tender, poignant memories, a few charred letters, a few crumpled rose leaves, a smile and a sigh, and—dust again—dust without the spark.

I rose from the shabby armchair and, given over to melancholy, paced the room. For once

Les Misérables had failed to cheer me. God might be in his heaven, but it seemed to me that, even so, all was wrong with the world. Rather should I have preferred to believe that God was not in his heaven. From more intimate troubles my mind passed to world troubles—the war, the inglorious aftermath of bungling and grasping, the greed of labor, the venality of politicians, the ominous threat of anarchy. I wondered if those who had died fighting did not look down and consider that they had sacrificed themselves to no purpose, that they had died in vain. Bitter thought. But what remedy was there with which to cure the sick world? Work of course. There lay the solution, and apparently it was precisely that solution that labor did not care to accept. Work? Yes, they would work, if they were permitted to name their price. Otherwise they—having made much money during the war—would strike and the country could go to the devil. Was this that wonderful American spirit of patriotism that I had heard so much about? Was this that backbone of the nation? If so, why then the nation was afflicted with spinal meningitis.

So upset was I by these dark misgivings that I determined to go out and walk in the night. I opened my door quietly and stole down the

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stairs. It was very dark, but in the hallway the moonlight came in through a glass transom over the front door. This door I found fortunately to be unlocked. Doubtless the landlord of the Hoffman Arms realized that his inn contained nothing more tempting to a burglar than flies and fly paper.

I stepped out to the screened veranda. It was then about half past ten and the air was perceptibly and refreshingly cooler.

"This should do me good," I reflected, and strode down the path under the horse-chestnut trees to the rickety gate.

Now, as I have said, the Hoffman Arms stands at a crossroads and, accordingly, the front gate provides one with a view in four directions. While I was hesitating which way to turn, I heard subdued voices approaching, evidently along the road that paralleled the shore—the voices of a man and a woman in earnest conversation. I thought nothing of it, but instinctive curiosity caused me to wait until they should have passed, so with no idea of eavesdropping but merely not to make of myself a foolish figure standing alone at the gate, I stepped a little aside into the shadow of the nearest horse-chestnut tree.

Presently the two came into the full light of

the moon and I saw that they were Hector Ramsen and Deborah. Something—I know not to this day whether it was an evil instinct or only a decent desire not to intrude—made me remain quiet in the shadow. Heaven knows it was all perfectly innocent what they said.

“And so,” I heard Hector ask, “you think young Coventry is attractive?”

“Oh, yes, professor,” she said. “He is very beautiful, isn’t he?”

Hector chuckled quietly.

“The French, my dear, say *un bel homme*, but it is rare for an Anglo-Saxon to say a beautiful man. Men apparently are not supposed to be beautiful. But Coventry, besides being beautiful, has many other lovable qualities, and *‘gratior et pulchro veniens in corpore virtus.’*”

“Yes,” she agreed, “that is true.”

“I sincerely trust,” continued the professor, “that you two are going to like each other.”

There was a short silence. They were now standing by the gate not ten yards from me, and I confess that I felt very guilty lurking there in the shadows of the trees. But it certainly was too late now to step out and greet them. I should have appeared absurd. At length Deborah spoke.

“Why,” she said—“why do you say that so

earnestly—that you trust we shall like each other?”

“Why?” repeated Hector.

He seemed at a loss for an answer. He stammered a little and readjusted his spectacles as he does when embarrassed.

“My dear,” he said, “it is because I should like to see you happy—I have your happiness very much at heart.”

She turned away a little in silence, digging at the grass with a slim slipper. Her hair cast dark shadows across her face, but her eyes shone like stars in a black pool, and the moonlight lay silver on her bare limbs. She was like some dryad of the forest, cool and yet panting, shy and yet filled with flame.

“You care so much then?” she half whispered. “I am glad that you do and I will try to—to please you. Good night.”

She gave him her hand.

“Good night,” she repeated.

“Er—good night,” said Hector.

He stood motionless by the gate, watching her go back down the road. She walked beautifully and swiftly, as though without an effort. She did not look round.

Hector watched her until she was lost in the

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shadows, and then with a sigh, which I took to be of perplexity, opened the gate and went up to the inn.

“I wonder,” I said to myself, “I wonder.”



## CHAPTER XI

**T**HE next morning George was not at breakfast. "Where is he, Uncle Foster?" queried Annabel, who as usual appeared fresh and fragrant as a flower with the dew on it. "Where's poor old George?"

"How should I know?" I temporized. "Perhaps he's in bed; perhaps he's drowned himself in the ocean. I am his guardian, to be sure, but after all he is of age and I am not responsible for his appearance at every meal."

"Don't be silly," said Annabel. "You know perfectly well where he is."

"I never denied I did. Eat your hominy, there's a good girl."

"I'd rather throw it in your stubborn face," said she. "Think what a nice mess it would make of your mustache."

"Annabel," I said, "you look radiant this morning. That green dress becomes you admirably."

"It is nice," she agreed. "Uncle Foster, where is George?"

"Bathing," I answered.

"Bathing? Bathing where? Bathing in what?"

"In a bathing suit, I presume," I said.

Annabel said "Ah," and nodded her head slowly three times. Then she added: "I see."

Mrs. Jenks, at the mention of the words "bathing suit," looked up brightly from her hominy.

"Not that they all wear 'em in these parts," she remarked. "The wanton hussy! And no stockings ever on her legs either."

"To whom do you refer, Mrs. Jenks?" asked Annabel.

Mrs. Jenks eyed her ferociously for an instant. Then she recommenced on her hominy, but between mouthfuls she observed in her deep bass voice: "And what's more, you hate her yourself—like poison—you know you do! Don't say you don't!"

Annabel laughed noncommittally, but Hector Ramsen was visibly distressed.

"My dear lady——" he began.

"Oh, you!" interrupted Mrs. Jenks. "We all know you, Hector Ramsen, and we know your feelings on the subject. Of course if you want to come to Sun Harbor every Sunday it's none of my business. I mind my business and I dress properly. When I had charms to hide I hid 'em.

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I was modest—a violet. My husband, who's now under the sod, would tell you that if he was alive to-day."

"Times have changed, Mrs. Jenks," said Mary with a wise sigh. "The young things run wild nowadays."

At that moment George came into the dining room, glowing, radiating health and clamoring for food.

"Good morning, everybody," said he. "I'm hungry. Wonderful swim and a bully sunrise. That's the proper way to begin the day. Morning, Mrs. Jenks. I hope you slept well."

"I did not," said Mrs. Jenks. "I never do."

"How does she look in her bathing suit, George?" asked Annabel carelessly and making a point of buttering her bread with accuracy. "Is she satisfactory?"

"What?" said George.

Annabel glanced up and repeated her question.

"Oh," said George, "very satisfactory."

"She has straight legs at least," admitted Mrs. Jenks.

"I'll say so!" George agreed cheerfully, and tackled the hominy. The admiral grunted with displeasure. He was very chivalrous at bottom,

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was the admiral, and he had taken a fancy to Deborah.

"Nice table talk," he said. "Can't any of you think of anything decent to say? You remind me of tired business men at the Winter Garden; and you, Mrs. Jenks, you're the worst of all. Perhaps you're the tiredest."

"Hark to Farragut!" said Mrs. Jenks. "Who ever shocked a sailor? I'll have my pancakes now, Bessie."

However, the admiral's protest prevailed, for the conversation turned to less intimate matters than Deborah's legs.

The admiral and Victor Ramsen were contemplating hiring a catboat and going for a sail and Mary instantly suggested that she accompany them. I think she would have sailed into the black abyss of hell rather than visit the Peters again. She was as scandalized by Deborah as Mrs. Jenks, or perhaps both pretended to be scandalized. The admiral and Ramsen were forced, however reluctantly, to accept her companionship, so that left only Annabel, Hector, George and myself.

Personally I was eager to have a private chat with George. I was curious to hear how he and Deborah had passed the early morning—what impression she had made on him by daylight;

how she had looked; how she had conversed. But I was thwarted in this desire by my nephew, who captured Annabel and bound her hand and foot for the morning.

"A long walk," said George. "We will explore."

Shortly after their departure Hector announced that he was going to drop in on Professor Peters to leave him a book he had promised him. No, I must not bother to come along. He would be gone only a few minutes. The book, I noted, was Plautus' *Asinaria*.

And so I was left to myself. I went to my room to fetch down *Les Misérables*. I had reached Page 769 and hoped to finish the book within the year. Taking a decrepit wood-and-straw rocker from the veranda, I placed it under the horse-chestnut trees and plunged once more into the heart-rending agonies of Jean Valjean. Just as Thenardier seemed to have the poor fellow in his power there appeared before me Mrs. Jenks in felt slippers and supported by a cane. Despairing of being left unmolested, I rose and offered her my chair, which she accepted with a bass rumble that might have been thanks.

She settled herself slowly and with a great deal of sighing, groaning and muttering. Her

shaking, bony hands clasped themselves over her cane and she regarded me inquisitorially from small, watery, red eyes. She wore on her head, I remember, a little black Victorian bonnet which had once been trimmed with jet but to which only a few of the shining bits still clung. This was tied with ribbons under her scrawny chin. A figure you would say, to rouse sympathy, pity, compassion. But she didn't. She roused, rather, fear. I felt like Macbeth among the witches.

"Young man," she began—and I wonder if she knew what a tactful opening she had chosen—"young man, we're alone."

I despondently agreed that we were.

She leaned toward me and lowered her voice to what I expect she considered a whisper.

"I'm her grandmother," she said in a tone which she might have adopted to say, "I'm an infanticide."

I was not, however, greatly disturbed. This doubtless disappointed her, for she eyed me in silence, malevolently. "I'm Deborah Peters' grandmother," she said. "That makes you jump—thought it would."

She was right; I suppose I had jumped.

"No one knows it," she continued—"no one knows it but Joshua Peters and myself and now

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you; leastwise no one else above the sod. There's plenty being eaten by worms who knows it."

I was startled at first—of course I was startled—but upon second thought I was convinced that she was raving. I have heard much saner women than she was make as outlandish and as untruthful statements; younger women too, in possession of all their wits and all their teeth.

"My dear Mrs. Jenks——" I began soothingly. But she was not to be soothed.

"Young man," she interrupted severely, "I'm not your dear Mrs. Jenks and never was. I'm only one man's dear Mrs. Jenks and he's in heaven, and a more courtly gentleman never lived. He wooed me like a Romeo, you might say, and swept me off my feet like a Lochinvar. He was very passionate, but always the gentleman."

"I don't doubt it—I don't doubt it at all, madam," I protested. "What I was about to ask was why, if you are Deborah Peters' grandmother, you should so dislike her and her father?"

"Dislike 'em!" she echoed. "I don't dislike 'em—I hate 'em!"

"Just so," I continued—"but why?"

"He's no blood of mine," she said—"that fat-bellied little snipe with his spindly legs. He drove me out of the house—me, the mother of his own wife and the grandmother of his child. He won't let me near my own granddaughter. Yes, that's the truth. Not for twenty years now have I had so much as a word with her, and then she couldn't talk. So I hate him, and when I hate I get flashes of fire in my head, which is very uncomfortable. And I hate her too, because she's a shameless hussy and runs about naked. That's what comes of having no women to bring you up decent. But they'll be put in their place some day—both of 'em. You wait, young man, and see if they aren't! Him and his poison gases—I'll poison gas him!"

She was so fierce that I was veritably alarmed. She was like some old Cassandra spouting dismal prophecies. I wondered just how much of what she had said I could believe. Very little, perhaps, but she left me in no doubt as to the ill will that she bore toward Professor Peters and his daughter. Whether she would or could display her malevolence in a practical form was another question and, I feared, a very grave one.

Women at best are irresponsible creatures, with neither knowledge of the law nor respect



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for it. If they were as strong as men I am convinced that they would be constantly committing assault and battery on them, and of course they always would be acquitted by a sentimental male jury. We men do not stick together where a woman is concerned. We put very severe laws on the statutes to protect our weak sisters and then, when they themselves transgress, a gallant jury closes its tearful eyes and says, "Poor little thing, she has suffered so much that she is excusable." Indeed the point has been reached in this free and glorious land where women may murder with impunity, certain not only of an acquittal but of a benediction. And God help us, we are giving them the vote!

The above lament may seem to be a digression, but it is not. It expresses more or less accurately my thoughts and my forebodings after hearkening to Mrs. Jenks' hymn of hate. I felt that she had murder in her eye and that—given the opportunity—she would wreak what she would consider a sublime vengeance on the poor professor and perhaps on his daughter. In so doing she would doubtless consider herself the instrument of God. I believe that is what all decent murderers claim to be.

I wondered if it was my duty to inform Pro-

fessor Peters of the danger that hung, like that well-known sword, suspended over his head by a thread. Doubtless he would consider such a warning an unwarranted piece of presumption on my part; doubtless he was fully aware of the presence of Mrs. Jenks in the neighborhood and was fully acquainted with her disposition toward him and his daughter. But nevertheless, when a man is completely surrounded by deadly poison gas, when he dabbles in it by day and dreams of it by night, he affords his enemies an admirable opportunity to do him injury.

"Mrs. Jenks," I said at length, "may I be permitted to ask why you have seen fit to honor me with your confidence?"

She did not answer immediately but sat staring at me, and I thought I detected a smile—or better, a widening of the mouth—on her face. Finally she emitted a noise that surpasses my powers of description and to which no orthography could do justice. It was neither a laugh nor a clearing of the throat, but it resembled both. That it was intended for the former I could judge by that triumphant sparkle that appears in the eyes of old age when it achieves a laugh.

"Why?" she said. "Why? The babe wants to know why? Well, I'll tell him. To begin

with, I want you to understand, young man, that I've got eyes and I keep 'em open, not that it's much pleasure keeping 'em open these days, for most of the womenfolk you see are shameful to look at and most of the menfolk are ugly and no hair on their faces—or their heads for that matter. I'm one as always admired whiskers on a man, like my dear husband used to wear. No, don't you start twisting that mustache of yours. It ain't ample."

Just as I thought that her thousand-track mind had strayed to Track One Thousand and One she leaned forward, shook her cane at me and cried: "You're trying to marry that poor handsome nephew of yours to Deborah Peters! Don't deny it—you know you are!"

I was too startled to deny anything.

"Well, I won't have it!" she continued. "I won't have it! He's far too good for the wanton—the beautiful boy that he is—and he don't want to marry. I can see that well enough. It's only you old fools that's picking on him and throwing him into her perditionous arms. What should a young thing like him want with a wife, I'd like to know—the innocent baby? Wait till he learns what women are before you go forcing one on him. Let him make a few of 'em suffer before one of 'em makes him miserable for life.

Let him be a Don What-d'you-call-him for a time. Let him be a seducer. That's what my dear, dead husband was, and a better mate no woman ever had."

She paused only when her breath gave out.

"Mrs. Jenks," I said severely, "you're a vicious, immoral old woman."

She shook her head impatiently and made an osculant sound with her lips and tongue.

"It's you that's vicious," she said—"you and your loonytic friends. There's not one of you that don't want Deborah Peters for himself, and if you don't believe me ask Hector Ramsen."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Jenks," I said haughtily, "I am going to leave you in search of a little fresh air." And I stalked indignantly away. The nasty old woman!

## CHAPTER XII

**I** DETERMINED after some earnest deliberation to say nothing to Professor Peters about my unpleasant interview with his mother-in-law. But I did decide to approach Hector Ramsen on the subject. I bided my time, seeking a suitable occasion. For several days none presented itself; Hector, as I noted, passing a great part of his time at the Peters' house, whether in the company of the professor or of Deborah or of both I could not be sure. Of one thing at least I was certain—that Deborah, when she was not with Hector, was with George. She was not often alone those days.

George took to his part of young lover suspiciously kindly, evincing all the outward and visible signs of the great passion in its glorious and uncritical infancy. He talked of nothing or nobody but Deborah; he glowed in relating her charms; he praised God for having created such physical and spiritual perfection—and especially was he rhapsodic in the presence of Anna-bel or of Hector Ramsen. This amused Anna-

bel. What effect it had on Hector I was not able to judge.

As I have said, it was several days before I found an opportunity for a talk with Hector, and even then I fear that I myself created the opportunity. It was after luncheon—or mid-day dinner rather—and Hector was on the point of silently stealing away like Mr. Longfellow's Arabs. He had the *Asinaria* of Plautus under his arm, and I suspected that he was looking forward to a pleasant hour or two in the garden with Deborah. Now I have not read Plautus' *Asinaria*, but I doubt if most men would enjoy it and I am sure that not one woman in half a million would or could enjoy it. I marveled therefore all the more at Deborah. She was either one woman in half a million or a confounded young hypocrite. Then and there I made up my mind to find out which. But first my business lay with Hector, whom I intercepted in the hall.

"Hector," I said, "where are you going?"

"To the Peters'," he answered. "Deborah and I are engaged in a course of reading. You see, Foster, I have assumed the pleasant task of being her literary mentor. It is a grave responsibility, but Professor Peters has no leisure and there is no one else. I purpose that Deb-

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orah shall be the best-read young girl in the world. Yes—actually that—in the world.”

“A large undertaking,” I ventured.

“Not so large—not so large as you would think—not so large as it ought to be. You see, Foster, there exist very few well-read young girls in the world to-day. Think it over. How many are able to read both Latin and Greek—even simple Latin and Greek? Do you know of any? French, yes; German, yes—before the war; a smattering perhaps of Italian or Spanish. But of Latin and Greek their knowledge consists at best of vague memories of Cæsar’s Gallic Wars and the belief that Homer, a blind poet, wrote the Iliad in collaboration with Alexander Pope.”

“Well,” I observed, “what difference does it make? A woman is a creature of the spirit and of the flesh, but not of the mind. Deborah, for example—she is charming. But why? Not surely because you have taught her to read Latin and Greek. Not at all! She’s charming because through some happy accident of birth she was endowed with a beautiful face and a beautiful body and because God or somebody breathed into her an uncommon soul. As long as she has the limbs of a Greek and the Greek’s inborn love and appreciation of beauty, it is not

at all necessary to her perfection that she should be able to speak Greek."

The professor opened his mouth to reply.

"Wait," I interrupted, "I will walk along with you. I've more to say and you don't want to be late for your appointment, I'm sure."

Hector agreed cordially enough, but I imagined that I detected a trace of worryment in his manner. That I was not wrong he proved by his opening question.

"Is it anything very important you want to speak to me about?" he asked.

"It may be," I said.

He fumbled at his spectacles, removed them, polished them and finally murmured nervously: "Well, what is it?"

"It's Mrs. Jenks," I said.

"I thought so—I feared so. She—she has been talking?"

"A great deal—to me at least. She claims to be Deborah's grandmother, and she hates both Deborah and her father. She threatens them absurdly but atrociously. I want to know if there is any reason to take her seriously."

"What a pity—what a great pity!" said Hector. "She is Deborah's grandmother of course—her mother's mother. Deborah's mother died some time ago, but Deborah lost her before she



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died. The whole thing is very tragic. She ran away—left Professor Peters when Deborah was a year old.”

“Ah?” I said.

“Yes,” said Hector—“yes. There was no reason, you understand. I mean that Professor Peters always treated her well. She had no complaint—indeed she made none. She left a note——”

“They always do,” I said.

“Yes, she left a note stating that she had met someone else whom she loved more. That was almost twenty-five years ago. She died shortly afterward.”

“May I ask who or what was the other man?”

“Yes, of course. It was very strange, completely incomprehensible. He was a young Italian; a—well, a musician of a sort; a strolling player, I might say.”

“Ah?” I questioned again.

“Yes,” said Hector miserably. “You might as well know. He—he had a hand-organ.”

“What?” I cried.

Hector nodded—slow, gloomy affirmations.

“And—and a monkey,” he added with sad resignation.

“You don’t tell me!” I exclaimed, amazed.

“That was very brave of her, wasn’t it?”

Hector looked at me interrogatively.

"Brave?" he echoed.

"Yes, very brave. It was a great gamble, and she probably lost. Did the Italian neglect her and make her miserable?"

"Oh, no," said Hector quickly, "quite the contrary. It seems he made her very happy. They adored each other and never once did she regret the step she had taken. That's what made it so hard for poor Peters—the fact that an Italian organ-grinder and a monkey had been able to make her happy when he, Peters, with all his learning and culture, had failed. That, to me, is the incomprehensible thing—the tragedy of it."

I hesitated before I answered.

"Excuse me, Hector," I said gently, "but that, to me, is the most comprehensible thing about it and, I might say, the comedy of it—the divine comedy of it; and it brings us back to the theory I was just expounding—that charm has its roots in the flesh and in the spirit, not in the mind. The young Italian organ-grinder had a body and a soul, doubtless both beautiful. Professor Peters cannot claim those assets. Why, it's the most natural thing in the world, what Deborah's mother did—the most natural and, I grant you, the most unconventional. She had

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looked through Peters' blue spectacles and found nothing but test tubes, formulas and malodorous chemicals. When she looked into the young Italian's black eyes she saw generations of poets, singers, musicians and lovers. She saw the blue sky and the bluer sea; she saw the vineyards and the olives and the cypresses; she heard the plashing of fountains in turquoise pools; she breathed the scent of mimosas and of roses; and she forgot all else and clasped youth and beauty and romance to her breast—and I can't blame her."

Hector regarded me silently. I was somewhat flushed and excited, I suppose, but he was perfectly calm, with the calmness of one who has long since weighed the question and made his decision.

"Oh," he said quietly, "of course I don't blame her. I never said that I blamed her. I only said that I was very sorry for poor Peters—and incidentally for Deborah. Mrs. Jenks, you see, sided completely with Deborah's mother—so completely and so—so loquaciously that Peters ordered her out of the house. That accounts for her animosity. She attempted once to kidnap Deborah, for at heart she really loves Deborah, but I myself foiled that scheme. Mrs. Jenks is very garrulous, as you've noticed,

and is apt to give her plans away to strangers. What is her latest threat?"

"Her latest threat," I answered, "is to poison Professor Peters with his own gas."

Hector pursed his lips in a whistle.

"She is very vindictive," he said.

"Very," I agreed.

By now we had reached the gate of the Peters' garden, and while we lingered there we saw Deborah coming toward us down the path. Over one arm she carried a large straw basket filled with a tumult of flowers—blue and white clematis, cardinal-red poppies, marigolds, larkspur, irises, asters—all jumbled together and flowing over. The splendor of it was barbaric, and she herself was barbaric, or at least primeval. She came noiselessly, save for the humming of the bees that accompanied her basket. Her eyes were clear and open; her head was high; her clothes as she faced the breeze clung to her like Greek drapery. I thought of the Winged Victory, and then I thought of Proserpine, and of the wide garden where as a mortal she plucked her flowers.

"Good afternoon," said Deborah. "I've finished my gardening and am ready for the Asinaria. Did you ever see so many flowers?"

"No," I said; "I never have. I might add

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that they become you—more, certainly, than the Asinaria. You shouldn't be reading decadent old Romans, my dear young lady. You should be singing in the tree tops."

She laughed lightly, and it sounded, in truth, like a song in the tree tops.

"I am being educated," she said. "Come and listen to to-day's lesson, Mr. Langley. The professor is a wonderful teacher and I think it's very interesting. I like learning things. Your nephew for some reason or other disapproves horribly and we couldn't induce him to sit still for more than ten minutes. He says that Professor Ramsen can teach me all the dead languages he wants, but that he himself will teach me a new live one."

"Did George say that?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. Isn't he funny? Very nice and very handsome, but terribly funny, don't you think?"

"If you mean funny in the sense of strange, why—no, I don't think so. I'm inclined to agree with George."

"The trouble with George," said Hector, "is that he's too restless—lazy but restless. That combination doesn't make for repose and meditation."

Again Deborah laughed.

“You wouldn’t choose to have me reposeful and meditative either, would you?”

The professor considered both the question and the questioner.

“No, my dear,” he said, “I should choose you as you are—only emphasized.”

For reply she put a scarlet poppy in his buttonhole, adjusting it with her slim, brown, boyish fingers and patting his lapel affectionately. Hector beamed idiotically behind his spectacles. Suddenly he seemed to me comical, and yet very pathetic, standing there adoring her in his dapper gray suit with its convex white waistcoat, his little feet incased in foolish-looking new brown shoes and his disreputable panama in his hand: comical, because physically he was so ill fitted for the rôle of lover; pathetic, because I was at last convinced that he earnestly and hopelessly worshiped her.

## CHAPTER XIII

**A**NATOLE FRANCE, the wisest man alive, has said that two things were necessary to render women the terrible force they are to-day: civilization, which gave them draperies; and religion, which gave them scruples. Sometimes I believe that we are in a fair way to lose both. But those are moods of pessimism, engendered usually by a deplorable dinner in the society of freethinkers, free versifiers and free lovers. These women—and they are women, at least physiologically—have become so very free that the draperies are in grave danger, and with the departure of the draperies go, too, the scruples of men. And then, if we believe Anatole France, women will cease to wield the power in the world that they wield to-day. It is all very sad, is it not? The influence, the authority, the charm, the desirability of a sex destroyed by the intolerance of that sex for the very qualities that have enabled it to sway the world!

Drapery, mystery, the unknown! What is there in these near synonyms that has beckoned

to all men through the ages? I asked my nephew, George, about it, and he answered me in his usual blunt but not very enlightening fashion.

"Well," he said, "it's perfectly natural. It's what I was taught in mathematics to call an axiom—one of the things that are sure as death and taxes. Take all those fellows that went to look for the North Pole. They stopped going pretty quick, didn't they, as soon as one of them found it?"

I agreed that they did and begged him to continue with his exposition.

"Well, then," he said, "take a child. A child wants to live because life's a mystery to it. But an old man doesn't insist so strenuously on living as a child, because life's no longer a mystery to him and death is; in fact, death's about the only one left. And now," he continued, "if the ladies in the audience will kindly refrain from interruptions I shall proceed to my final point, which is of special value to them. Ladies, it is this: If you would attract men, see to it that you behave, look and think as little like men as possible, for men know pretty well what men behave and look and think like, and they all inwardly agree that it's pretty poor stuff. I thank you."



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There were unfortunately no ladies present to take this sterling advice to heart, so—aware of its pricelessness—I set it down here for the benefit of all and sundry.

“George,” I said when I had thanked him, “it occurs to me that in Deborah Peters we have a girl who lives up to your ideal. She wears no stockings, but she is nevertheless clad in spiritual drapery. She is a beautiful closed book—she breathes mystery.”

George nodded.

“Yes,” he said—“oh, yes. But the professor’s ruining her mind—trying to cram it with the trash that’s in his. Too bad.”

That was all I got from George. He left almost immediately afterward, with the intention, I suspected, of trying to undo some of Hector’s work. That was his habit in those days—to monopolize all of Deborah’s time that was not devoted to Hector; and, as I have hinted, my nephew’s teaching was quite dissimilar from that of the professor. Thus the poor girl was torn between the ancients and the moderns. I am not sure which she preferred, and I am not sure that she herself was sure. She found pleasure in the company of both—in that of Hector a constant and certain pleasure and in that of George a surprising, uncertain pleasure.

## There Goes the Groom     III

For George could be very moody and on occasions unnecessarily frank, almost to the point of brutality—the old Daniel Coventry characteristics.

One evening Annabel came to me and announced that she was bored. I could readily understand that she should be, for recently she had been thrown much in the company of her mother. True, the admiral and Victor Ramsen had taken her sailing and fishing and I had taken her walking and driving. But George had scarcely taken her anywhere.

“Come for a walk in the moonlight, Uncle Foster,” she suggested. “I am deserted by everyone except mother and I’m too young to be left alone with her.”

“Very well,” I said, “if you don’t think me too old for moonlight.”

To my surprise she blazed up quite angrily at this innocent remark and said: “Why do you keep harping on your age that way? You’re such a fool! Can’t you see that you’re only old because you pretend to be? Anybody would think from your conversation that you were a paralyzed octogenarian traveling in a wheel chair.”

I was puzzled, for I had never seen Annabel’s serenity ruffled before and now she was almost

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violent. However, she quickly recovered herself and ended her little outburst with a laugh.

"You aren't exactly a Romeo, my worthy uncle, but neither are you a Methuselah. So give me your hand and throw out your chest and rejoice, young man, in your youth. Besides, it's a lovely moon."

"Annabel," I said, "you're adorable."

"That's better," said she.

It was, as she had said, an excellent moon—a moon full and fat as a butterball. It was a warm, sensuous moon, unlike some that are pale and cold and rather melancholy, and there were no clouds to annoy it. I dislike a moon that is constantly being harassed by clouds, and if they chance to be black, ragged, hurrying storm clouds I shiver and am afraid.

"Let's go down to the road," said Annabel. "There's something I want to show you; something very exciting and scandalous—at least I hope it's scandalous."

So we went down through the forlorn village to the shore road. From there we could see the quiet ocean, with the moon's golden path stretching across it to the horizon, and we could hear the tide stealing gently in among the rocks almost at our feet.

"Oh-h!" cried Annabel, enraptured. And

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then she added: "If it only weren't for the dead fish!"

"Annabel," I rebuked her, "we cannot expect perfection in this life. There are always dead fish."

"You wise old owl," said she, squeezing my arm. "Come on. We turn, I believe, to the left, and the dead fish decrease as we proceed."

We paced slowly, arm in arm, up the road and Annabel began to talk of George.

"Just why, Uncle Foster, are you so eager for George to marry?"

"Just why? Well, I don't know just why. But on general principles I believe that young men should marry."

"You believe that men should marry?"

"I said young men," I reminded her.

"Oh," she said, "I see! Well, you surely don't believe that Deborah Peters is the right girl for him?"

I hesitated. I was, as a matter of fact, not wholly sure. I foresaw that Deborah would need at least a few minor adjustments before she would fit without friction into the life and environment of a Coventry.

"She is an extraordinary girl," I answered, temporizing.

Annabel tossed up her head impatiently.

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"Yes, she's an extraordinary girl. She's far too extraordinary. What on earth can George do with a wife who is interested chiefly in Greek, Latin and apiculture and who dresses as she does? Don't you see that George is superficially unconventional but that at bottom he is highly civilized? There's nothing primeval about George."

"Granting that you're right, whom would you suggest as a suitable person?"

"Pooh!" she exclaimed. "What business is it of mine or of yours or of Hector Ramsen's to suggest anyone? That's George's own business. What's more, he resents the suggestion that has already been made."

"Annabel," I said gravely, "are you quite sure of that? Are you quite sure that George has not fallen in love with Deborah?"

She laughed in what I deemed a patronizing, irritating manner.

"I'm quite sure," she said cheerfully—"and only a stupid old blind idiot would think otherwise."

"But," I objected, ignoring the insinuation, "he sees a great deal of her—he's with her almost constantly."

"Yes," she agreed. "That's his revenge. He's getting back at poor Hector Ramsen. I

think it's very blameworthy of George, but he's had great provocation."

I stopped short in the road. I was disconcerted. More, I was annoyed. And for some reason or other I was annoyed not so much with George as with Annabel—the calm, cool, lovely, inscrutable Annabel. I could have shaken her. But she was so perfect and frail and exquisite as she smiled in the moonlight that I dared not lay violent hands upon her.

"In heaven's name," I cried, "if he's not in love with Deborah, whom is he in love with?"

"George is in love with George," she said demurely.

I regarded her angrily, suspiciously, but the calm smile never left her lips and she did not turn her eyes away from the sea.

"I'll put the question differently," I said at length. "Who is in love with George?"

At that she turned her head slowly toward me, opened wide eyes and repeated, "George is in love with George."

"You little blonde devil," I muttered, "it wouldn't surprise me if you were in love with him yourself!"

"It probably wouldn't surprise George either," said she. "But—I'm not. George is too immature. Come, uncle, stop sulking or I

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shan't walk any farther with you. We've a quarter of a mile farther to go too."

We walked in silence that quarter of a mile. Presently we came to a narrow wagon track that led from the road down toward the sea. At this point the land jutted out, forming a rugged promontory, on which stood a cluster of pines blacker than the sky. We turned to the right down this wagon track and forthwith were plunged into almost complete darkness. The moon just barely filtered through in occasional bright splotches. Hidden in the midst of the pine grove and invisible from the shore road, we suddenly came upon a house. A white house it was, with green shutters, done in an adapted colonial style and evidently of modern construction. It was the first vestige of anything neat, orderly and modern that I had seen at Sun Harbor. The lights that glowed behind the window curtains showed those curtains to be of fine lace and the two pots of green shrubs that flanked the entrance gate had obviously not been purchased in the village.

"Well, well!" I said, amazed. "Where did all this come from? Who lives here?"

"That," said Annabel, "is the excitement; and that, I hope, the scandal."

"Don't stop," I urged. "Tell me all."

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Even as I spoke the sound of a piano floated out to us—a piano pleasantly and efficiently played—and then a very fair soprano voice began to sing. The song seemed to be mostly about someone's baby's arms. When the eulogy of the baby's arms was over we heard laughter and men's voices.

"Well," I repeated, "who lives there?"

"The house," began Annabel with the intonation of a Cook's guide, "was built about the year 1910 by a real-estate firm which was trying to boom Sun Harbor. It is the only one of its kind in existence, as Sun Harbor wouldn't boom. Neither would the house sell, though it is a beautiful specimen of Dutch colonial, equipped throughout with modern improvements. Eventually, in despair, the real-estate man was forced to live in it himself with his wife and three small children. This suited neither him nor his wife nor the three small children, so he spent a great deal of money advertising the house for rent at a sacrifice, and at length the advertisement was answered. This, I am informed, occurred but two weeks ago, or shortly after our arrival at Sun Harbor. The present tenants moved in day before yesterday."



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Annabel paused to mark the effect of her revelation.

“Who are they?” I persisted.

“Ah,” said she, “he desires to know their names! His curiosity is insatiable. There are two tenants—a brother and sister. The brother is known in refined vaudeville circles simply as Florian. He sings romantic ballads in French, but he is perhaps not a Frenchman. The sister—ah, the sister! Even you may have heard of the sister! She is a musical comédienne—also possibly French—called Esmée. Just Esmée. She’s the leading lady in that charming, delicate, intimate little production entitled *The Pink Teddy Bear*.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’ve heard of her.”

“Oh, well, then you know all that I know; except of course that their visitor this evening—and last evening too—who is making so merry with them is a Mr. George Coventry, the well-known millionaire orphan and man about town.”

## CHAPTER XIV

**T**HE uncanny ability of women to discover all sorts of things of interest to themselves but of no value to mankind in general or to human progress is a matter that has often roused my comment. Where merely personal interests are concerned a woman is a first-rate sleuth, an untiring Columbus of the trivial. She stops at nothing to ascertain the shop where some total stranger bought her gown, and she devotes the cunning of a criminal lawyer to detect some flaw in any man's relations with his wife. If only all this energy could be harnessed like Niagara and made to turn the wheels of progress and civilization, what a world we should have—and, alas, how little would lazy, blundering man have to do with its development!

Witness Annabel. In two days she had learned the names, professions and careers of the new tenants of that house, to say nothing of the name of their visitor and the hours of his visits. Yet after twenty-five odd years of living and learning she could not have told you who

Hannibal was or the name of Dido's best-known visitor. I do not claim that this latter knowledge is especially valuable in itself, but it is certainly knowledge difficult to avoid acquiring, whereas the former knowledge obviously implied much time and labor spent in its attainment—or did it? Annabel, I knew, had become very friendly with many of the villagers and their wives and offspring, and it was exceedingly probable that the village gossips kept themselves thoroughly well posted on current events in their community. The presence of George at the house of Esmée she might have ascertained by recognizing his laugh. The young have keen ears.

At any rate I marveled at Annabel—and I marveled as much at George. What was the boy up to? I shuddered to think of old Daniel Coventry's wrath had he lived to learn his son was associating with a—well, an actress. Old Daniel had always called them painted women. I mean he called them that in public. What he called them in private I have no means of knowing.

Before we returned that night, Annabel and I, I requested her earnestly not to inform her mother of our strange discovery. To this she readily assented, adding that her mother, if in-

formed, would doubtless become annoyingly hysterical. Mary, I well knew, lived in a world of her own, and in that world there entered nobody who had trodden the stage. I suspected that her world was peopled mainly by bishops—Episcopalian only—and by directors of charities and rich philanthropists. Once indeed she had received a renowned actress in her house, but the actress on that occasion had been one whose liaison had endured so long that it had taken unto itself something of the virtue of fidelity. No, we would not tell Mary.

But I resolved to consult with the admiral and Victor Ramsen, for the admiral in his way was a keen student of life, and Victor was a practical, hard-headed man of affairs. I got them together the next evening in my bedroom and I laid before them briefly but accurately the facts of the case as narrated to me by the omniscient Annabel. To my surprise they took it calmly enough. The admiral indeed seemed to be amused.

“Well,” he said, “where’s the harm? A girl and her brother, and George calls on them a couple of times, and she sings and they all three laugh. Anyone’s lucky that can raise a laugh out of Sun Harbor! Don’t be an old woman, Foster—where’s the harm?”

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“George is supposed to be—er—attentive—shall we say?—to Deborah,” I pointed out.

“Who says he is?” demanded Victor Ram-sen.

“He has made it fairly obvious himself,” I said.

“How?” asked Victor.

“He has spent a great deal of time with her.”

“Pshaw!” exclaimed the business man. “What does that prove? He’s put nothing on paper, has he? Signed any contract? Well, then, he’s as free as he chooses to be. A suit for breach of promise would be thrown out of any court.”

“I wasn’t considering the legal side of it,” I ventured. “I don’t think it’s fair to Deborah—I don’t think it’s quite decent.”

“It seems to me,” observed Victor gloomily, “that Deborah is able to take care of herself; and if she can’t there’s always Hector round, I notice, to help her out. Hector’s making an old ass of himself. Personally I don’t think it’s fair to George. He got George into this after all and now he’s always in the way. This whole business is a farce anyhow. I’m sick of it, and heaven only knows what’s happening in the world—the papers are about three days old. I’m tempted to go back to town and call my

pleasure outing at an end. As long as the whole country's going to the devil, why not let George go too along with it? The bottom's dropping out of the market, the nation's a hotbed of socialism, the Democrats are making a hash of everything, call money's up to ten per cent, a lot of old women won't let us drink and nobody wants to work. Things have reached a pretty pass when the sewer digger drives down in the morning to his sewer in his limousine. It's all the fault of the administration."

"Do you mean," suggested the admiral, "that George and this—what's her name?—this Esmée are the fault of the administration?"

Victor snorted.

"I didn't mean it, but I've no doubt it's true. Just another example of the unsettled conditions—the feeling of unrest—due to the delay in making peace."

"Victor," I said, "you are a great help. I will think over what you say and act accordingly. May I not suggest that I wire to Washington in your name?"

"You may not," snapped Victor. "What do you want to know anyhow? What to do with George? Simple! Go over yourself and have a look at the girl. If she's loose and impossible tell George she's a wonder, congratulate him on

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his taste, tell him she's pure as Easter lilies and has the face of Saint Cecilia. That will take him aback. If she's nice and a good sort tell him to bring her over to meet his Aunt Mary. That will take him aback too. All George wants is a little relaxation. He wants to be a devil. I don't blame him, but nothing will cool him off so quickly as encouragement. No one can be a devil unless everyone says, 'How devilish!' "

"You old rascal!" cried the admiral admiringly. "Where did you learn all that? Foster, I think that Ramsen has lived—what? That gloomy manner of his has deceived us—tired business man and everything. Nothing to it! I'll bet he's not tired at all."

Before the bet could be accepted or refused there came a knock at the door and George entered.

"Hello!" he said. "I saw your light going, so I thought I'd drop in."

There was an embarrassed silence—even Victor did not vouchsafe a word.

"Sit down, George," I said.

"Hope I don't interrupt anything weighty," said George. "If this is a cabinet meeting, say the word and I'll clear out. I'm just back from a call on Florian and Esmée."

We were all, I believe, startled at the casualness of his tone, and he must have been aware that we were startled, for he said: "Oh, I forgot! I don't suppose you know about Florian and Esmée, unless Annabel's told you. Annabel knows everything. She's a walking encyclopedia and a Who's Who."

"Annabel," I said, "mentioned to me the presence in Sun Harbor of two new arrivals with whom you seem to be on fairly intimate terms. I was a little surprised that until now you yourself had said nothing of this sudden friendship."

"Sudden?" echoed George. "There's nothing sudden about it. I've known them for years. It was I in fact who urged them to come down here and liven things up. You'll all be glad to meet them—all except perhaps Aunt Mary, and she needn't have anything to do with them if she doesn't want to."

"Why, then," I asked, "did you maintain such a discreet silence regarding their existence until now?"

George shrugged his shoulders and smiled a little.

"Oh," he said, "you know how it is. We're all so darned pure in this country. We think everybody on the stage is immoral and so of



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course don't play round with them openly for fear of injuring our reputations for spotlessness. We're especially shy about being seen with people from musical shows unless they have reached the rank of star. Then, I believe, they have become whitewashed and on special occasions are allowed to perform for charities. Once they have performed for charities everything is quite all right. Well, Esmée and Florian have recently performed for a charity of some sort and I now consider it safe for you to meet them and—if you care to—to be seen in their company."

"George," said the admiral, "you're becoming cynical."

"Not I," answered George cheerfully—"not I. I'm merely trying to learn and to comply with the high code of my country."

"What's the nationality of these two—er—artists?" asked Victor Ramsen.

"French," said my nephew firmly. "Anna-bel probably insinuated they were Germans or Austrians, but they're not. They're French. Florian fought in the war."

"And they're decent people?"

"That depends entirely on what you consider decent," said George frankly. "They aren't very hypocritical, I'm afraid. Esmée, for in-

stance, isn't as well behaved as Queen Victoria was. Florian—well, aside from Saint Anthony, he's about as good as any of us, and perhaps he's got some virtues that Saint Anthony lacked. They're both—Florian and Esmée—very wholesome, amusing, delightful people, and you'll all like them, I'm sure—except Aunt Mary."

"Very well," I said, "I for one shall be delighted to meet them."

"Do they speak English?" queried the admiral.

"Perfectly," said George—"so perfectly it makes me ashamed of mine."

"I'll chance it then," said the admiral.

"As for me," observed Victor Ramsen. "I shall consider it a great pleasure. I confess I'm in need of some cheerful companionship. This administration and the Eighteenth Amendment have filled me with gloom."

"Don't worry!" said George. "Florian and Esmée have no politics, but they're well stocked up with the forbidden stuff. I'm afraid they look on it once in a while when it's red—or yellow or deep amber, for that matter. But, being French, they never do it to excess."

Thus terminated what George called our cabinet meeting, and I will admit that I was some-

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what relieved in my mind. I am no prude and, as I have said, my concern over George's new intimacy—or, rather, recently revealed intimacy—had been mainly on Deborah's account. George, I presumed, was bound to have his fling, and if he was treating Deborah fairly there was no great harm brewing.

The following afternoon George took me to call on Florian and Esmée at their house, which they had rechristened—sarcastically I suppose—Elysée Palace. We went in the canary-colored runabout and I felt like a college boy trying to be a devil of a fellow. The canary-colored runabout seemed peculiarly appropriate to the sensation. I had seen just such runabouts stationed in front of ornate little hotels on the West Side with a blonde beside the driver's seat and a brunette clinging to the running board. Generally both the blonde and the brunette wore coats of leopard skin and small red hats—a blaze of color that attracted a not unwelcome crowd. These things, I say, I associated with canary-colored runabouts, and half a century of life and wisdom was unable to rob me of the not unpleasant feeling that I was being a young devil. I found that I was glad I was unmarried, and I rejoiced to believe that the admiral and Victor Ramsen, whose visit had been post-

poned until the morrow, were eying me with envy. There was some advantage after all in being younger than they.

George had his foot on the throttle most of the way and the roadster made nothing of the distance. We swung up gallantly in a cloud of dust before the entrance. George rang and Florian himself opened the door. We went into the living room, where Esmée was waiting us, stretched gracefully but informally on a chaise longue. She was clad, I remember, in yellow silk, and that is all I do remember about her clothes. At any rate they seemed handsome and adequate and Mary herself could not have labeled them immodest. Mary perhaps would have said that she wore them immodestly, and if she would have meant by this that Esmée did not perpetually pull them down at the knee and up at the neck, she would have been correct. Esmée apparently was of the belief that clothes, once on, should be left alone and permitted to cover or not as they pleased.

George introduced me and laughed—vulgarly, I thought—when I bent and kissed her hand. All great artists—especially foreign ones—like to have their hands kissed. I knew that better than George.

She was a fine, striking woman, this Esmée—

a big, abundant, full-blown woman and built on the lines of the Venus of Melos. She was not heavy, but she was big. Everything about her was big, from her eyes to her feet, and she was very dark. She had a great deal of black hair piled on top of her head and done into those little sickle-shaped curls that French women like to wear about the forehead. She had a pair of great dark eyes, shaded by long black lashes and—I think—by the black crayon. Her wide red mouth was startling against the pallor of her skin. Mary, I am sure, would have disapproved violently of her mouth, and so would have, I suppose, any other woman. But it was too good-natured a mouth to be sensual, and it was almost constantly parted in a smile that dimpled her cheeks like a child's. I remembered that the beautiful Lantelme had just such a smile. It was strange; it was almost miraculous—paint and powder and black crayon all over her, and through them all and in spite of them all this gay, unsophisticated smile that transformed her face into that of a child.

Is it only French women that possess this transformatory smile, and if so, why? I think it is because they take the business of living less seriously than we Americans. They play when they can and when they play it is not merely to

benefit their health. They are not sure at the bottom of their hearts that life is real and life is earnest, and they are, moreover, not anxious to be convinced that it is any such thing. In this they are like children, and that perhaps is the reason why they are able to smile like children.

I am of the opinion that the majority of us brood overmuch over our own defects. It is a form of egotism, this constant beating of the breast and crying of *mea culpa*. We admit readily enough that man is born sinful, but we forthwith proceed to shudder when the admission is proved correct. It may be very unmoral of me and contrary to the approved teachings of the church, but I believe that if, like the Boy Scouts, we performed one good, generous Christian deed a day we should be doing extremely well. Then, I think, we could forget our ninety and nine sins and smile like children, thereby adding to any chance virtues already in us that rare and inestimable one of cheerfulness.

All of which brings me back to Esmée, who was cheerful. Not a cheerful saint—there are few such—but a cheerful, human sinner.

“Doubtless,” said Esmée, when after greeting her I had seated myself beside her—“doubtless you are warm. May I offer you something

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cooling? A gin fizz? An ice tea? A syrup

"He'll have a gin fizz," said George, "or miss my guess."

"George is very fresh," said Esmée. "He's quite spoiled."

I agreed that he certainly was, but that this case he did not miss his guess.

She pressed a button beside her and a maid appeared—a French maid, as unnatural as those seen in current dramas.

"*Deux jeen feez pour ces messieurs,*" said Esmée.

"A perfect household," I murmured. "I have seen nothing like it, madam, since I came to Sun Harbor."

She laughed deeply and gently.

"I try to import civilization," she said. "I like to be comfortable. I am like the English who take their bathtubs to the Sahara."

"How," I ventured, "did you happen to come to this Sahara?"

"Didn't George tell you?" she asked. "He came on purpose to amuse George. He said he was very bored."

I glanced at my nephew severely, but he was talking to Florian by the piano and paid no heed.

"Florian and I," Esmée continued, "we

bored in New York and George was bored at Sun Harbor. We are old friends, so we decided to rescue him. Now we are here I understand so well why poor George was bored. It is dead, this place—it is the morgue.”

She shuddered artistically and smiled at me as if already convinced that I agreed with her. I found it subtly flattering that she should take it for granted that I was a man of her world and that therefore Sun Harbor would unquestionably bore me.

“It is not Paris,” I answered platitudinously.

“What do you find to do? Anything?”

“Nothing,” said she. “I read my books; I make music; Florian sings; I sleep all morning; I do my physical exercises to keep supple; I take half an hour of air in the late afternoon when it is cool. The repose is good for me, but it is boring. Florian especially finds it boring. There are no women for him to make love to, and my brother is never happy when he is not making love.”

Hearing his name mentioned, Florian moved over and joined us. He was a slim, dark young man, with smooth, glossy hair and a skin as pale as his sister's. Women doubtless considered him handsome, but I found his eyes too large and his lashes too long and his hands too small



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and white. The very traits that made his sister beautiful were, it seemed to me, defects in him. But I never admired his type and perhaps I do not do him justice.

"Esmée," he said in his rich, suave voice, "you speak as though I were a phenomenon. Is anyone happy when he is not making love? Are you yourself?"

"Oh, I," said Esmée—"My God, I'm only happy when I'm out of love!" Esmée, I noted, translated *Mon Dieu* literally, and sprinkled the appeal to her Maker as liberally in her conversation as the French are wont to do.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked, turning to me abruptly.

"Heavens, yes!" I said. "I find it a mixed pleasure."

"I don't," said she. "I find it constant torture. I'm in love with George now, and it's very painful, because poor George is not in love with me."

"Ah!" is all I could think of to say.

"Yes, it is very sad. Your nephew has a heart of ice which I cannot melt."

"George," I said, "do you admit this accusation?"

George grinned cheerfully.

"You mean about the heart of ice? Not I!

Esmée only says that to rouse your sympathy for her. She's trying to lure you, and you'd better look out, because she's a very dangerous woman. She's a vampire."

"No," disclaimed Esmée, "I'm not! I'm not thin enough. My God, did anyone ever see a fat vampire? Besides I am too good-natured, and no successful vampire is good-natured. And I have no mystery—I'm always completely frank. And I like men—almost all men. And a great many I love, which is bad. Bad for me, I mean, not for them. Women I detest. They are hypocrites, and the only brains they have they employ in concealing their defects and their vices. Here in America all women are supposedly white doves frantically struggling to escape man, the cruel huntsman."

"Huntsmen don't shoot doves," suggested George.

"My God, I know that!" said Esmée. "It's merely an American fairy tale I am telling. I say that is what they pretend to be."

"What are they in reality?" I inquired.

"Amorous little idiots," said Esmée. "Florian," she added after a pause, "sing something for us."

Florian went to the piano and sang some French love songs, modern—and not so modern.

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He sang them delightfully, I thought, with a lyrical tenor voice well adapted to the romantic quality of the themes. I have always enjoyed French love songs, finely rendered. They possess a spirit of subtle and sophisticated melancholy that one does not find in quite that degree elsewhere. In them the season is generally autumn—both actually and metaphorically—and the woman is faithless and love is without hope. They come very near to being tragic and only escape it because one feels reasonably confident that the forlorn lover will find consolation the following spring.

Shortly after the songs George and I went back to the Hoffman Arms.

“Well,” said George on the way, “what do you think of them?”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “They seem all right. Is Esmée in love with you too?”

George laughed.

“What do you mean by ‘too’?” he asked

“Oh, Deborah—and I have no doubt, Annabel.”

“That’s silly,” said George.

“Maybe it is,” I agreed, but without conviction.

## CHAPTER XV

**D**URING the next week George divided his time impartially between Deborah and Esmée, and I reached the definite conclusion that he was a philanderer. This distressed me not a little, for I had ever believed that, the heart being too important an organ to trifle with, a man should be in earnest in his love affairs.

“That theory,” Annabel assured me, “would stamp out most love affairs.”

I found myself in Annabel’s company a great deal. Without boasting, it was evident that in the absence of George she preferred me to the rest of our party and I certainly preferred her. She was always pleasant, almost always happy and she had no imaginary ailments or grievances. When Annabel was offended it was for just cause. That, I think, is a great asset in a woman’s character.

Annabel went very seldom to visit the Peters and when she did go she did not seem to care to stay long. She and Deborah had little in common, as was perhaps only natural, since Deb-

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orah was essentially a child of Nature, while Annabel was a daughter—and a very creditable daughter—of civilization. Deborah could read Greek, but Annabel could read human beings, and I am not sure that hers was not the more desirable ability.

One day, nevertheless, Annabel and I found ourselves in the course of our walk in front of Professor Peters' gate.

"Shall we go in?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders a little, smiled a little and said: "Very well."

As we loitered along the untended path through the confusion of flowers up to the house we were surprised to hear a voice singing in the garden. It proceeded apparently from a small grove of maples that grew in a far corner where the beehives stood. We stopped to listen and Annabel said: "Since when has Hector Ramsen acquired a velvety tenor—or is it George that has turned troubadour?"

But she knew as well as I that it was neither Hector nor George. Perhaps she did not know as well as I that it was Florian. No other man in Sun Harbor but Florian could have sung a French love song so gracefully or so passionately. I doubt if any other man in Sun Harbor could have sung one at all.

"The complications multiply daily," I observed after an interval of perplexity. "I am inclined to throw up my hands in despair. Does no one in this year and generation know his or her own mind? Has it become now the way of young men and young maids to flit about like butterflies from flower to flower? Annabel, do you know who that singer is?"

"Who?" said she.

"That is Florian—the famous Florian."

"I thought as much," said Annabel pensively. And then she added: "Score another scalp for Deborah. That makes three. The child is irresistible, isn't she?"

"Don't ask me," I objected. "I am in total darkness. It was only the other day that I rebuked George for being a philanderer—for playing with Deborah's young affections."

Annabel laughed.

"You did that?" she said. "How amusing of you! Don't you see that George is just trying to play safe and he believes that there's safety in numbers? George is doing his darnedest to escape the matrimonial net and at the same time to be decently gallant to all women. That is," she added, "to all but me. George isn't very gallant to me."

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"No," I agreed, "he isn't. But you don't seem to care very much."

"I? Oh, no, I don't care very much. I didn't come on this absurd party to be with George."

I ventured no observation in connection with this last, for I felt that I was far beyond my depth. If Annabel had not come on George's account, why had she come? Conceit, which is an ever-present factor in the character of any male, hinted to me that I myself was perhaps not totally unattractive to Annabel. I make this confession in all humility and fully cognizant of its absurdity, but I dare to say that most men have at one time or another pleasantly surmised that their presence was very welcome to some woman.

Moreover, the man who has reached that conclusion is more than normally modest if he does not add in his heart of hearts: "Poor little thing, I'm afraid she's getting to like me too much."

Male readers, I know, will claim I am doing them a deep injustice.

Women readers of all ages will say: "So that's what men are like, the poor fools!" And then if they're at all honest they'll admit that's exactly what they are like themselves. For there is no human being alive who does not

secretly believe that, given an adequate opportunity and an understanding companion, he can make himself devilishly attractive.

As I say, I ventured no comment on Annabel's remark. But I immediately began to perform some confused but rapid thinking. On that account we walked in silence to the door of the house and—still in silence—lifted the rusty old knocker. The servant—there was but one in the establishment—admitted us. Yes, Professor Peters was home. He was just washing up. He had been working in the laboratory. If we would sit down she'd tell him we were here.

Almost immediately the professor appeared. If he had been just washing up he gave little evidence of it. As he advanced toward us on his spindly legs it was apparent that he was very excited. His bald head was shining with soap or perspiration, his eyes were blinking nervously behind the blue spectacles and his fat, stained hands were fluttering about incessantly like fat, stained birds.

"You have arrived at the great moment!" he exclaimed. "My experiments have reached the stage where I am about to test their correctness, or—if I may say so—I am about to prove that they are correct. As for me, no doubt exists in my mind. My poison gas is a success—



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an overwhelming success. Only this morning in the laboratory I killed a large beetle with an infinitesimal quantity of it. Now I am planning more conclusive proof—proof on a bigger scale. I am going to try it on the chickens.”

He beamed from Annabel to me, seeking our congratulations and applause.

“Heavens!” exclaimed Annabel. “The poor chickens! Are you going to exterminate them all?”

“All!” said Peters sententiously. “That is, all but a few which I shall remove from the yard and send to the village for safety. If you will accompany me to the chicken coops I will explain to you what I plan to do.”

There was nothing to do but go with him. The poor man, I was convinced, was crazy. A sane man, even a chemist, would not propose to slaughter his good chickens with poison gas. I only hoped that he had no intention of serving the victims for dinner, and there and then I resolved never to eat chicken in his house. That Annabel was obsessed by the same qualms she evidenced immediately.

“But, professor,” said she, “isn’t it very extravagant to waste good edible chickens that way?”

“Extravagant!” he exclaimed. “Extrava-

gant! Chickens! What are chickens, however excellent, compared to the advancement of science? My only regret is that I cannot legally test my gas on human beings. If the state would but turn over to me the criminals in the death house—or if there should be another war!”

Annabel shuddered.

“I think,” she said, “that after all I’d rather have you try it on the chickens.”

Now Professor Peters’ laboratory was in a small brick outhouse connected with the main house by a covered walk. As we emerged out to this walk we heard once more the sound of Florian’s voice drifting up from the remote corner of the garden.

“What’s that?” demanded the professor, stopping abruptly and cocking his head to one side. “What’s that?”

“Someone singing in the garden,” suggested Annabel.

“Who singing in the garden?”

Annabel hesitated. I did not help her—I was at a loss what to say. The professor became openly disturbed.

“Who singing in the garden?” he repeated. “I don’t tolerate singing in my garden. Everyone knows that.”

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He was so exaggeratedly annoyed that, seeking for the reason, I remembered the history of his wife and I recalled that she had eloped with a man who made music—music, to be sure, with a hand-organ and a monkey, but nevertheless music.

“It’s in some foreign tongue!” cried the professor. “I won’t permit it! Whoever it is, I won’t permit it!”

Before we could interfere he was off, hopping down the garden path with amazing agility. Annabel and I followed more slowly, distressed and anxious. Before we reached the grove of maples the song had abruptly ceased and we could distinguish the professor’s angry voice hurling invective. Then we came upon the culprits.

Deborah was seated on the grass, pale, alert, surprised. Her dark eyes were wide with what must have been fear. Perhaps she had never before seen her father in a rage. I hope not. Florian stood beside her and above her, very much at ease, a calm, suave smile at his lips. But Professor Peters confronted them, a quivering fat little figure of wrath. It seemed incredible that his thin legs could sustain the weight of his anger.

“Who is this—this man?” he cried, as if man

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was the darkest name he could think of to call him by.

Florian bowed with perfect grace and urbanity.

"May I not present myself?" he asked. "I am Florian. You, I suppose, are Professor Peters, the eminent chemist. I have had the pleasure of knowing your daughter for several days, Mr. George Coventry having been gracious enough to introduce me. To-day I ventured to call upon her, and since singing is my one poor accomplishment, I ventured to sing. I only can hope that I have not disturbed you."

"Disturbed me!" echoed the professor. "Yes, young man, you have disturbed me. I tolerate no singing on my grounds; and what is more, I tolerate no strangers inside my gate."

At this Deborah surprised me exceedingly by getting to her feet and saying, with her hand on Florian's arm: "Come Florian, let us go outside the gate. It is just as pleasant."

I looked for a violent outburst from Professor Peters and it came.

"I forbid you, Deborah!" he bellowed, pointing an arm at her. "I forbid you, do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I understand. Come, Florian, let us go."

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The professor took an impetuous step toward her, but Florian intercepted him. There was a collision of bodies and it was the professor's that recoiled.

"You must not use force, sir," suggested Florian mildly. "Your daughter, I believe, is of age, and besides you will only make yourself appear ridiculous."

"I order you off my grounds!" yelled Peters. "And if you don't go I'll—I'll shoot you!"

"That is not the question. You are quite justified in ordering me off your grounds and I am quite willing to go. But that, if I may remind you, is not your main desire. You desire that I should go and that your daughter should stay. Am I not right?"

"Of course you're right! That's what I desire and that's what will happen."

"Perhaps," said Florian. "But it is for Deborah to decide."

He turned to Deborah and looked down at her gravely.

"I am sorry," he said—"I am very sorry. You see how it is. I only plead that I did not know I was so unwelcome. You will not be angry if I go now—at once? It is better perhaps."

At that moment Florian got all my sympathy.

It was he who was conducting himself decently and the professor who was the boor. I wondered if the Italian who ground the organ had not had something of Florian's appeal. One talks a lot about the dignity of age, but there is a quality more impressive still and that is dignity of youth. Florian possessed that dignity, and I could not but admire him.

I waited—we all waited breathlessly—for Deborah to speak. She hesitated for a while, her eyes turning from Florian to her father as if weighing the value of the two men. I could not fail to see the look of bewildered anger that her father's attitude roused in her. He was not, it must be admitted, presenting an admirable figure—unreasonable rage never does. But nevertheless she was young and the habit of obedience must have been thoroughly instilled within her, so I was not greatly surprised when I saw the anger gradually fade from her eyes, leaving only the bewilderment. It amazed her that her father could conduct himself so outrageously—it amazed her, but it no longer angered her. That at least was the interpretation I put upon it.

Her arms dropped to her sides and she said: "I will go with you as far as the gate, Florian."

He bowed. She gave him her hand and he

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bent and touched it respectfully with his lips. Then without further words they walked together to the gate. What they said on the way I did not learn until later.

The professor removed his blue spectacles and wiped his face with his handkerchief. I saw that as I had surmised he had little darting bird eyes. And then I ceased to look at him, for as in some hideous dream I thought I detected an evil, shrunken face peering at us from behind one of the maples. I passed my hands across my eyes and looked again. The face had gone, but I heard distinctly a crackling in the underbrush. Annabel grasped my arm convulsively. Wide-eyed and with lips parted, she was pointing toward the hedge.

"Mrs. Jenks!" she whispered. "She just vanished like a witch!"

"So you saw her too!" I exclaimed. "Thank God for that! I thought I was going mad."

## CHAPTER XVI

**P**ROFESSOR PETERS, I learned afterward, was so disturbed by the incident under the maples that he refrained that night from destroying his chickens. I myself was so disturbed by the evil vision of Mrs. Jenks that I could not sleep. When I encountered the old lady at supper I shuddered, but she seemed unchanged—perhaps a bit more talkative and not quite so hungry. She disappeared immediately after supper, before I could make up my mind whether or not I desired a word with her in private. I firmly believed that she had gone out to continue her spying on Professor Peters and his works.

Vainly once more I struggled to put myself to sleep with the aid of *Les Misérables*. Once again Victor Hugo's great work betrayed me and left me abstracted and wakeful. George I knew to be at Esmée's house and the admiral and the Ramsens had gone to bed early. Mary was in her room with a book of optimism, and besides, Mary was never any great help in times of stress. There was nothing to do but to get



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out and walk myself into a more soporific condition—a method that I always employ when Victor Hugo fails me.

I went down to the shore to listen to the deep-voiced sea, the mother and lover of men, as Swinburne calls it. It was a cloudless night, the sky filled with stars and a dying moon hanging pale in the midst of them. I chose the direction away from Esmée's house, for I had no desire for company or casual conversation; and especially I had no desire to encounter Florian. To do so, I felt, would mean rehashing the whole painful affair of the afternoon.

At a short distance from the village the shore road swung inland, but a footpath branched off from it, following closely the contour of the beach. This path led me out to the extreme tip of the crescent that formed the main harbor and then, turning abruptly on itself, skirted the shore of a deep adjacent cove, so sheltered and landlocked that the ocean lay within it tranquil and noiseless save for a gentle crooning at its margin. I could see the reflections of the dark pine trees almost undistorted on its surface.

Finding a comfortable spot, I stretched myself out full length on my back, my hands under my head, and contemplated the eternal stars. And I thought, as one always does think in that

position, of the immensity of space and the puniness of the world. It consoled me in a fashion to reflect how utterly unimportant the most important of us is—to realize that my own most momentous act had less effect upon the great scheme of things than the act of a sand flea had upon me. I could readily comprehend how, believing this, men came to adopt the philosophy of eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and I only wished that I could cease to worry over the petty complications that surrounded me and sleep undisturbed in the belief that all was either for the best or for the worst, but that in either case I was powerless to alter it. A sincere materialist, I decided, must be a very contented person, for it is only the idealist who is caught napping that can be dissatisfied with himself.

My reverie was interrupted by a break in the rhythm of the ripples on the beach. I sat up and looked across the narrow cove, and opposite me, in the deep shadow of the pines, I saw a white figure moving down toward the shore. At the water's edge it hesitated. Then it emerged from the shadow. The starlight struck it and clad it with silver and I saw that it was Deborah.

I remembered Actæon and the fate that befell

him when he surprised the chaste Diana bathing—I remembered Actæon, but I could not turn away my eyes. It was a picture that Chabas would have delighted to put on canvas, and I regarded it as I should have regarded a glorified Chabas. And yet there was about it something more of the classic inspiration. Almost I could behold the daughters of Nereus stretching out their white arms to welcome her to their home, the water. Almost I could hear drifting down from the hills the notes of the pipes of Pan.

There should have been whispering and laughter behind the trunks of the pines, and the flash of white-limbed dryads dancing in the starlight. There should have been satyrs peering with red eyes through the branches or beating time with cloven hoofs to the music of their reeds. All this there should have been that the picture might be complete, but all this my imagination was able to conjure up before my eyes and I seemed to live again in the days when the pagan gods walked the earth.

Deborah advanced timidly, with many a backward look, into the water. When it was to her knees she stooped and ran her hands through it, tossing it high in the air. Drops of it fell on her hair and hung there, sparkling like diamonds in a black setting. Then slowly she let

herself fall forward, her arms outstretched, her head back, her lips parted, and in an instant I saw no more than a white arm flashing rhythmically above the water, and a trail of silver spray to mark her path as she swam.

"Now," I said to myself as I walked home—"now I understand what Mrs. Jenks meant when she accused Deborah of being a wanton hussy. Damn Mrs. Jenks and all her works, for it is only wanton eyes and wanton tongues that make wantonness of beauty!"

I was still engaged in my diatribe against Mrs. Jenks and all others who see the world only through impure glasses when I reached the Hoffman Arms, and as I rounded the corner by the gate I almost collided with the especial object of my invective. Mrs. Jenks was at first more startled than I at this unexpected encounter. She emitted a sudden sound that I can only compare to that of an angry cat—a sort of spitting snarl. I, for my part, said "Good Lord!" But she regained her equilibrium, both mental and physical, very quickly.

"Well," she said sharply, "what are you doing prowling round all alone at this hour of the night?"

"That," I answered, "is entirely my own affair."

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"It is," she said, "providing you've been minding your own affairs and not spying on respectable old ladies like me. If you've been following me, young man, you'll be sorry for it."

I assured her I had not been following her—that I had no desire to follow her ever.

"You think you're pretty smart," she retorted, shaking her cane in my face—a cane that I imagined she did not really need to employ. "You think you're pretty smart, but you're not as smart as me for all you think. I'm a poor deserted widow lady, but I've still got wits in my head, and before long you'll know it—and that old fool Peters'll know it too. Now go to bed you, and leave me alone. Such goings on I never did see, spying round on a poor defenseless old woman."

"Madam," I said with a bow, "won't you precede me? Surely your evening's work is completed—whatever it may have been."

She glared at me. I could see her red eyes gleaming in the starlight. Then without further words she hobbled up the path and into the house. I followed slowly and meditatively.

## CHAPTER XVII

**I**N search of advice and counsel, I waylaid Annabel the next morning and told her of my encounter with Mrs. Jenks. For some reason I did not think best to tell her of my vision of Deborah. I felt perhaps that words of mine were too crude to express the beauty of it—that it was a subject for poetry but not for prose. But I told her about Mrs. Jenks, for Annabel had been with me under the maples when I had glimpsed the old woman's evil face spying through the bushes and Annabel was prepared to witness that the face had really been there. Anything seen by her eyes was reasonably certain to exist and not to be a phantom conjured up out of a fanciful brain.

“Annabel,” I concluded, “I think this is very serious. There is no doubt that Mrs. Jenks is keeping a close watch on the Peterses, and with no laudable reason. I know, and she admits, that she loathes the professor and is at the least not pleased with certain of Deborah's traits. It is apparent that she is plotting some injury to them. What shall we do about it?”

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"We should warn Professor Peters, I think," said Annabel promptly. "Perhaps Hector Ramsen would be the best person to do it. He's more intimate with the Peterses than we."

"I agree with you, Annabel," I said. "You're a very sensible woman, besides being a very beautiful one. How does it happen you haven't been spoiled? I should have thought that gallant youths would have turned your head long ago."

"Well," said she, "I don't pay much attention to what youths tell me. They are too enthusiastic to be sound judges. But of course when old gentlemen like you condescend to drop me a kind word I value it enormously and blush deeply with joy."

She made a profound curtsy, and though the action partly hid her face I vow that she actually was blushing.

"Annabel," I said, "you urged me the other night to quit harping on my age and now you yourself call me an old gentleman. I'm not so old as that after all, you know."

She nodded.

"I know," she said. "Let's go and see if we can't find Hector Ramsen."

We found Hector brooding by himself under a tree in the front yard. Of late I had noticed

that he seemed depressed, disinclined to talk, and at the same time I had noticed that he was seeing less of Deborah than had been his custom. Florian, I suspected, was the cause of this. Poor Hector, what chance did he have with both George and Florian in the field? I was sorry for him, but I could not but admit that it was his own stupid fault; that he had brought the consequences upon his own bowed head. Why in heaven's name had he not seized his opportunity when he had it? Why had he not run his race when there were no other entries against him? Even a spavined, broken-winded old crock is certain to win in a field of one.

"Hector," I began, "cheer up. We've come for a conference. We need your advice."

"*'Disce, sed a doctis,'*" said Hector sadly.

"No," said Annabel, "we must have it in English."

"Forgive me," said Hector. "I will not lapse again and I am all ears. What is the trouble?"

I explained to him at length and in detail. He listened quietly, his mouth puckered up to whistle when my recital touched on the more startling events. When I had finished he re-



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moved his spectacles and shook his head gloomily.

"How very unpleasant!" he said. "What is to be done—what is to be done? We must deliberate."

"You must warn Professor Peters," urged Annabel. "That's the only thing to do, and it ought to be done at once."

Hector replaced his spectacles and stood up.

"Come with me," he said. "I will warn him, but I shall need you both to bear witness."

We went with him.

Had it not been for Annabel no word would have been spoken on the way and all she said was: "Poor Deborah, she's the one I'm sorry for after all!"

Once more we entered the Peters' gate and once more we traversed the garden to the house. But we did not reach the house, for Professor Peters, who must have seen our approach from the window, burst forth from the door to meet us. That he was not tearing his hair was due solely, I am sure, to the fact that he had no hair to tear. But he conveyed the impression of being a man who would have torn his hair had it been possible. I had seen him angry and excited; now I beheld him bewildered and in anguish. Through all these emotions he main-

tained his resemblance to a bird. I mean of course merely a physical resemblance, for I am sure that no bird could have experienced anything that approached the professor's mental processes. Almost he threw himself into Hector's arms. Almost he wept on Hector's shoulder. He murmured incoherent phrases, while Annabel and I stood by, silent, awkward, aghast.

At length from his incoherence there emerged a phrase that recurred at intervals like a theme in a musical composition:

"She has gone! She has gone!"

Hector, Annabel and I glanced one at the other.

"Who has gone, Professor Peters?" asked Annabel.

May I remark here parenthetically that it is usually the woman who finds her tongue first in times of stress?

"Who has gone?" repeated Annabel.

The professor straightened up and blinked at her.

"Deborah, of course," he said in a tone that implied she should have known that at once.

Annabel nodded her head sagely.

"Where has she gone?" was her next query.

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"How should I know?" retorted the professor.

"When did she go?" ventured Annabel.

"I don't know—at daybreak—last night—don't know."

"Well," said Annabel, now apparently quite calm, "if you would tell us all you do know perhaps we could help you find her. We have an automobile."

"Yes," agreed Hector nervously, "let us go into the house and talk it over."

Professor Peters signified a hopeless assent and led the way. We took chairs in a circle in the amazing living room.

"Now, Professor Peters, please tell us everything," said Annabel.

Peters said nothing for a while, but eyed Annabel intently through his blue spectacles. Then he muttered: "You seem a very normal, capable sort of young female. You'd make a good wife."

Annabel at this was just a bit disconcerted, but she said, "I hope so," and urged him to return to the subject in hand.

"Yes," persisted Peters, "I don't doubt you'd make me a very good wife."

"Come, come!" I exclaimed impatiently. "This is no time for absurdities! If you have

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any serious news to tell us you had best go ahead with it."

Perhaps I was overharsh to the poor mad old man, but I could not stand by silently while he vented his senile admiration on Annabel. Senile! Yes, I repeat the word! He was at least ten years older than I.

"I have told you the news," said he plaintively. "Deborah has gone. She left a note—just like her mother. Her mother left a note when she left me. They all leave notes—and they all leave me."

"May I see the note?" asked Hector.

Peters fumbled through all his pockets before he found it. Then he handed it over to Annabel, who chanced to be beside him. She read it aloud.

"I have gone away with Florian," it read. "He wants me to marry him at once and there is nothing I desire more. I am going without your permission because I know you would never give your permission. I hope that you will not feel badly about it and I hope that Professor Ramsen will not think I am being very unwise. If he does, remind him that '*Amare et sapere vix deo conceditur.*'"

"I'm sorry," said Annabel, "but I don't know what that Latin means."

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We turned to Hector. He groaned and put his face in his hands.

"I taught her that myself," he whispered. "It's from Publius Syrus. It means, 'To love and be wise is scarcely given even to a god.'"

"It's your fault then!" cried Peters. "It's all your fault, Ramsen, for cramming her head with a lot of Roman immorality!"

Hector lifted his head and answered gently:

"It is not my fault that the saying is true. It is not my fault that since the beginning it has been proved true. And it is not my fault that, knowing it to be true, men and women have sacrificed everything for love and thought it worth the sacrifice. I think," he concluded wearily—"I think that the important thing to do is to discover what sort of person this Florian is in order that we may know whether Deborah has offered a vain oblation."

"I don't have to discover," said Professor Peters brutally. "I know! He's a singer. That's enough to know."

"I didn't refer to his profession; I meant, rather, his morals."

"Morals!" snorted Peters. "Morals! He has none!"

"How do you know that?" I asked.

Peters glared at me.

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"I've had experience with music makers," he said. "They're all alike. They produce pretty noises, but they never produce a marriage certificate. I know them, I tell you, I know them! It was one of them that stole my wife. And now another one of the tribe comes along and steals my daughter. I'd exterminate the whole race if I had my way. I'd poison—"

He stopped abruptly, his phrase unfinished, and I fancied I saw a look of cunning satisfaction steal into his face. Perhaps he realized that he was betraying himself, for he got up, turned his back on us and commenced pacing the floor.

"Well?" queried Annabel.

"Well what?" replied Peters.

"Do you want us to help? Do you want us to search for them? Just what do you want us to do?"


"You have an automobile, you say?"

"Two of them."

"You know where this—this Florian fellow lives, or did live?"

"Yes."

Peters turned at length and we could see that he was strangely calm. In fact he had regained completely his self-control. It was a startlingly abrupt transition.



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"You would be doing me a great favor," he said, "if you would be kind enough to take me to his house. That, if I may say so, is the logical starting point. I am desirous of finding him—and my daughter too, of course—and I am prepared to receive them back here as long as they choose to stay. Perhaps I was overhasty in my denunciation of him; perhaps I was a little to blame. But, my friends," he concluded magniloquently—"but, my friends, it is a father's duty to forgive."

Hector was obviously greatly moved by this speech—Annabel not at all. As for me, I remained dubious, for I was unable to reconcile his present generous mood with his earlier uncontrolled wrath. To tell the truth, his uncontrolled wrath seemed to me the more natural and appropriate.

He disappeared to fetch his hat and coat and during his absence I had an opportunity for a word with Annabel.

"What do you think?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

"The worst," she whispered. "Murder—poison gas—exit Florian!"

But Hector, who had not overheard our remarks, said: "I am glad that poor old Peters

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is taking the thing so decently. He's really a fine chap at bottom."

Looking at Hector, I reflected that it was he who was taking the thing decently, for I knew that his heart was very heavy within him.

At the Hoffman Arms we were fortunate enough to find Asa, our sybaritic chauffeur, disengaged—or rather engaged in nothing more important than caressing Bessie, the waitress. We ventured to interrupt his amours and he agreed to pilot us to Esmée's house.

I confess that I was exceedingly nervous. None of us except myself had met Esmée, and I had met her but once. I wished that George were with us. I did not know where George was; but I need not have worried, for on our arrival we found George with Esmée.

"What's all this?" he exclaimed. "A delegation come to offer me the Presidency? Well, gentlemen, if the peepul insist, I should be a disloyal American to refuse. Voice of the peepul—I hear you calling me, what?"

This was a bad opening for us—or for me, since the duty of master of ceremonies devolved on my harassed shoulders.

"Keep quiet, George," I urged. "This is a serious matter."

Then I turned to Esmée, who was standing



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beside her chaise longue surveying us with a smile—that smile of hers which resembled so much that of a pleased child. I performed the introductions awkwardly and then I cast about in my mind for a suitable prefatory remark. Esmée herself, unwittingly I suppose, came to my aid.

“Won’t you all please sit down?” she said. “I am so glad to know you all and particularly Miss McKnight, of whom I have heard much from George. I regret that Florian, my brother, is not here. He will be very cross with himself for having lost this opportunity to meet Miss McKnight. He has gone away for a day or two and he has taken our only automobile. The pig! I miss the automobile, I think, more than I miss Florian.”

There was an embarrassed silence while we digested this information.

Finally Professor Peters cleared his throat loudly and said: “We came on purpose to see your brother.”

The rudeness of the remark caused Esmée to glance at him briefly in a sort of shocked surprise and it caused me to feel ashamed of being in his company.

“Ah!” said Esmée.

Annabel hastened to explain that the profes-

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sor was greatly upset; that indeed it was but natural he should be greatly upset; and that aside from the pleasure of meeting Esmée the object of our visit was to restore the professor to his normal equilibrium.

"What," asked Esmée, "has occurred so grievous as to upset the professor?"

"It seems," said Annabel, "that your brother has eloped with his daughter."

Esmée leaned over and pushed the bell on the wall beside her.

"That," said she with a delightful smile, "is cause, I think, for champagne."

And in spite of our protests the amazing woman ordered a bottle of Pommery and six glasses.


"Of course," she said, "I take it for granted that you are really serious when you tell me this. You are certain that Florian is in earnest—that he desires to marry her? It is not just one of his frivolous fancies?"

"That," said the professor savagely, "is what we came to find out."

Esmée lifted her black eyebrows.

"Ah," said she, "but surely you should know that better than I! Has Florian ever told her that he desired to marry her?"

"She says that he has told her so, but that



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proves nothing," Peters growled. "It is just what his kind would tell her."

"His kind?" Esmée repeated. "May I ask what you know of his kind? But no, there is no need to ask. You know nothing. If you knew Florian you would know that he has never before asked a woman to marry him. He is always very scrupulous about that. Thousands of women have begged him to marry them, but he has never even suggested before that such a thing was possible. He has told them frankly from the beginning that anything so ridiculous was out of the question. So you see, professor, that if in the case of your daughter he has spoken of marriage to her—why, my God, there is no cause for you to be uneasy! On the contrary there is every cause for you to rejoice and drink champagne. The girl is most fortunate. She is—how do you say it?—she is the lucky girl."

As she concluded the French maid passed a tray bearing foaming glasses. Mechanically, in a daze, we each took one, and mechanically, in a daze, we drank with Esmée to the health of the bride. It was a strange proceeding—a sudden deviation from the expected that one encounters so often in dreams.


I think that George aptly expressed our feel-

ings when, setting his glass down, he ejaculated: "Well, I'll be damned!"

It was the first sign of emotion which George had displayed, and even that could scarcely be termed appropriate to a heart-broken lover whose girl has just run off with another man. I judged in consequence that Annabel's verdict had been correct and that George was neither in love with Deborah nor heartbroken at her faithlessness. Hector was the only real sufferer.

When I came to my senses, Esmée was addressing Professor Peters.

"Tell me, professor," said she, "something about your daughter. Is she, do you think, a suitable wife for Florian? Will she make him happy? It is of such importance to a young man who gives up everything to marry that he should choose a worthy mate. Florian has had so many wonderful chances that, my God, it would be a pity if his selection proved unsuitable. You must understand, I am sure, how anxious I am for him—a sister's anxiety that her brother should be very happy. Of course I shall welcome any wife of his and shall try to be fond of her, but it is—how shall I say it?—it is a little disappointing that he should have chosen a girl about whom I know absolutely nothing."



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The professor gaped at her—stared and positively gaped. The ground, it seemed, was being taken from under his feet and Esmée was stealing his speeches. Instead of being the catechist, he found himself the catechized, and he did not relish it.

“Madam,” he said, “everyone here but yourself can testify to my daughter’s character. No one but you can testify to your brother’s. I have no doubt he is a dissolute rake and I shall consider it very fortunate for my daughter if he marries her at all.”

At this absurdity George could not repress an untimely guffaw. Esmée smiled gently.

“Professor,” she said, “you don’t really mean that, I’m sure. No young girl is fortunate to be married to a dissolute rake. But do not distress yourself, for George will tell you, I think, that Florian is not a dissolute rake. Florian is probably no more of a rake than you were at his age. No, I retract that. He is normal and you were possibly subnormal.” Then, addressing Annabel, she said: “My dear Miss McKnight, I apologize for a conversation that is not suited to a *jeune fille*. But Professor Peters insists on saying the most shocking things. If he wishes to continue you would perhaps desire to go to another room?”

"Madame," Annabel answered with just a hint of a smile, "you are very thoughtful. However, I don't think that Professor Peters will become any more salacious and so far I am unshocked. But I admit that I fail to see how anything can be accomplished by continuing the conversation in its present vein. We aren't getting anywhere."

"But where do we want to get?" inquired George.

"We want, I imagine—or at least Professor Peters wants—to get in touch with his daughter. He wants to assure her that she is forgiven. He wants both of them to return."

"Under the paternal roof?" queried Esmée. "But they must first have their honeymoon."

"What do they want with a honeymoon?" growled Peters. "Niagara Falls, I suppose. They can have their honeymoon just as well as not in my house."

"Oh," said Esmée, "I doubt if Florian would agree to that. One doesn't want one's in-laws on a honeymoon—if ever. Still, that is for Florian to decide."

"Yes, yes, yes," said the professor, and again, "yes, yes, yes. It's for Florian to decide, but where is Florian?"

"I don't know," replied Esmée sweetly.



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“Where is Deborah? Why not wait until we hear from one or the other of them. I am certain that Florian will telegraph me soon. Will you not all stay to luncheon? I should be charmed.”

It was a tactful dismissal. I am sure that had she done as she wished she would have yawned in our faces. Peters obviously bored her dismally and Hector and I had scarcely volunteered a remark. Annabel, I believe, she liked, for Annabel had common sense and did not become excited. Besides Annabel was very beautiful and Esmée liked beautiful things round her—George, for example.

We all left except George.

## CHAPTER XVIII

**I**T did not occur to any of us until it was too late that we had failed to warn Professor Peters of the danger he was in from Mrs. Jenks. That, you remember, had been the primary object of our visit, but matters even more weighty had put it from our heads. Besides, I considered—and so, I am sure, did Annabel—that we had intruded enough in the Peters' domestic affairs. Everything was proceeding in a ridiculously erratic fashion, but as long as George was not involved I saw no cause for further interference on my part. We had come to Sun Harbor to marry George to Deborah, but it was obvious that that could not now be accomplished. My main concern for the moment then was to get him out of Sun Harbor before he should take it into his head to marry Esmée.

Alas, how sadly I misjudged my young nephew! One generation should never attempt to estimate another. Annabel knew far more than I and Annabel did not seem worried.

It must not be thought that during all this



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excitement my stepsister, Mary, had remained passive. Not she! She was agog with curiosity as to our actions, which from the date of Esmée's arrival had been shrouded for her in mystery. Once we had decided to shield Mary's tender sensibilities from the shock that meeting an actress of the musical-comedy stage would have inflicted upon them, we had perforce to continue in our discretion. So in order that she might not hamper our operations she was sent to sea regularly and daily in a catboat with the admiral and Victor Ramsen, both of whom complained bitterly, but consented to have her in order to promote the greatest good of the greatest number. In spite of our precautions, however, Mary gathered—from Mrs. Jenks, I believe—that something mysterious was afoot of which she was being kept in ignorance. Mrs. Jenks, though lately become more taciturn, let fall a few significant remarks from time to time.

But strangely enough, even after the scene under the Peters' maples, she had nothing to say against either Florian or Esmée. Did she, I wondered, know who they were? Did she even know of Esmée's existence? I could not be sure, but I had great faith in Mrs. Jenks' scent for news—great faith in her ability to gather information.

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At luncheon on the very day of the elopement she startled us by saying without prefatory remarks: "A singer now—that's a good profession. Making music in this world of tears. It's like the birds in the trees—and the Lord loves the birds in the trees. He marks the fall of a sparrow, though sparrows don't sing very nice—not what you'd call the best voice of all the birds. I used to sing when I was a young girl, and very agreeably too, people said. Do you sing, my dear?"

Annabel, to whom this question was addressed, replied that she sang, but badly—like the sparrows.

"No," said Mrs. Jenks, "you wouldn't sing well. You're too blond. A blonde don't ever sing like a brunette. Dark-complected people have more feelings—I'm dark complected."

As a matter of fact, her coloring was yellow and gray—yellow skin and gray hair—but we gave her the benefit of the doubt.

George, as I have said, remained at Esmée's house for luncheon, but shortly after our meal was over we heard the yellow runabout draw up to the door and presently George burst into the front parlor. He started to speak, but checked himself when he saw that his Aunt Mary was present.



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"Where have you been, George?" asked Mary. "At the Peters'?"

"More or less," said George vaguely. "Want to take a little spin, Uncle Foster? Why don't you and Annabel come out? The others, I suppose, are going sailing."

"I'm tired of sailing," said Mary. "I'd like a ride myself. Why don't we take Asa and the big car and then we can all go."

"You forget," I said, "that Asa has to drive the admiral and Victor down to the pier. They aren't tired of sailing, I presume."

"I'm not so sure," replied the admiral. "I'm tired of almost everything."

This was bad—it was not the admiral's cue at all. I was sure that George had news and it was highly important that Mary should be removed from the vicinity somehow or other. Hector had gone upstairs to take a nap, so the duty of removal lay on the admiral and Victor; and behold, the admiral bid fair to fail me! Even Victor grumbled, though he well knew what was at stake.

"We might cut out the sailing for once—eh, admiral?" he remarked. "Let's motor down the shore until we come to the nearest ticker and stop there for dinner. It's sure to be civilized anywhere there's a ticker and I've had

enough of the simple, unwholesome fare that this simple, unwholesome inn provides."

"Oh!" cried Mary, clapping her fat hands like a pleased baby—"oh, that would be simply wonderful!"

The admiral gave me a not very discreet wink.

"Well, Foster," he said, "what do you say to that? A nice family party."

"That's splendid," I answered. "You and Victor and Mary take the big car and stay away as long as you please."

"But why don't we all go?" asked Mary.

"Someone's got to stay with Hector," I explained. "He's not feeling well. I'm going to stay and Annabel and George must keep me company and protect me from Mrs. Jenks. But you three go along and have a good time."

So we finally got rid of Mary, and I was well pleased with my diplomacy.

"Now, George," I said when they had gone, "tell us the news. I know you have some to tell."

"I'll say I have!" he answered. "Gather closer, boys and girls, while I whisper."

Annabel and I gathered closer and George whispered—a loud stage whisper, to be sure.

"The guilty couple have been found!"

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Then he paused for his dramatic effect.

"Don't be silly, George," urged Annabel.  
"Go ahead and tell us all about it."

"You don't seem properly excited," objected George. "Here I come rushing up to tell you the great news, like a Marathon runner or something, and all you say is, 'Don't be silly.' I'm very much disappointed in you both."

Annabel punched him as hard as she could in the ribs.

"Good Lord, George," she said, "you are an aggravating ass!"

"Ah," said my nephew, "that's better. That's far better. Symptoms of interest at last. Well, it's this way: Esmée received a telegram from Florian during lunch. My golly, that fellow Florian's a card—he's a cool baby! What do you suppose he said?"

"Well, well, what did he say?" I inquired impatiently.

"More interest—this time from Uncle Foster," observed George with a grin. "Audience is getting appreciative, I'm glad to see. Well, Florian said—or wrote—as follows:

"Have married Deborah Peters. You don't know her yet, but you will. We both return tomorrow. Purchase large supply stockings. My

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wife most wonderful woman in world, but has none. FLORIAN."

George sprawled back in his chair with a beatific smile on his face.

"What do you think of that?" he said. "Isn't that the damndest?"

"Florian seems like a very practical sort of man," said Annabel. "He thinks of everything, and at the same time he doesn't forget to praise his wife. I shouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be a very good husband."

"Of course he will," agreed George heartily. "Much better than poor me, for example."

"You don't seem particularly distressed," I observed. "I suppose, now that the object of our visit has been frustrated, we may as well pack up and return to town."

"Return to town!" my nephew echoed. "Return to town nothing! I'm just beginning to enjoy it down here."

"George," I said severely, "you're nothing but a male flirt."

"Oh, no," said he—"dear me, no! Don't you see that I'm trying hard to marry and settle down? Only no one'll have me. Someone always comes along and cuts me out. First it's you and then it's Florian."

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“First it’s me!” I exclaimed, throwing grammar to the winds. “First it’s me! What in the name of heaven are you talking about?”

“I was talking about you and Annabel,” George said serenely.

“You ass, George!” said Annabel with a laugh, but I noticed she was blushing.

## CHAPTER XIX

**O**N the next afternoon, true to their word, the bridal couple returned to Sun Harbor and Esmée gave a sort of post-honeymoon wedding breakfast in their honor, to which everyone was asked—even Mary and even Professor Peters. We were in some doubt as to what action to take in regard to the transmittal of Mary's invitation, but the admiral and Victor Ramsen flatly refused to sacrifice themselves any longer. Neither of them would watch over Mary during another afternoon and both of them insisted on attending the wedding breakfast themselves. So with trepidation the matter was laid before my stepsister, with some slight embroidery, to be sure, and with great emphasis on the fact that Esmée and Florian had performed for charities.

"In that case," said Mary, "I suppose it would be all right for me to go. Of course for Annabel it is out of the question."

This staggered us—all of us except Annabel.

"If you go, mother, I go," she said firmly. "You're just as pure as I am and twice as easily



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shocked. Besides there will be nothing shocking. You don't think it's going to be a bacchanalian orgy or anything like that, do you?"

"Well," hesitated Mary, "I don't know. If it's anything like most weddings—"

"Yes," interrupted Annabel, "but it won't be. It will be far better behaved."

In the end we all went. And Annabel once more was right. It was calmer than most wedding breakfasts I have attended.

The meeting of Professor Peters and Florian passed off harmoniously, the professor still adhering to his policy of forgiving and forgetting and Florian behaving as if there were nothing to forgive or forget. Florian was sincere, but the professor was, I felt sure, playing a part. My suspicions were strengthened when he announced that on the following evening he intended to give a demonstration of the potency of his poison gas. This was of course the demonstration that he had postponed owing to an unforeseen elopement in his family—the demonstration which involved the slaughter of his chickens.

"I purpose," he said, "to employ but a minute quantity of the gas, and I have reliable gas masks for any of you who care to witness the

great experiment. It will, if I may say so, be something you can boast of having seen. It is the first practical demonstration. The next will be at Washington in the presence of officials from the War Department. Petrine gas, I have christened it—and my friends, it is Petrine gas which will render the Army of the United States invincible!”

We accepted, most of us with no intention of going, for the professor, from a perverted sense of dramatic effect, had fixed the hour at midnight.

“Less people will be abroad,” he explained, “and it would be unfortunate if some ignorant stranger should pass by without a mask and be killed. It might involve me in difficulties with the police.”

“Very possibly,” agreed George. “And it would annoy the ignorant stranger too.”

Though Florian and Deborah agreed to attend the great experiment, Florian made it quite plain that he had no intention of living with his wife under the professor’s roof. I confess that I was greatly relieved when I discovered this to be the fact, for I had not ceased to harbor grave suspicions of the professor’s intentions and I should have felt it my duty,

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had the circumstances been otherwise, to warn Florian of the risk he ran.

As I look back on it now, I realize what a prying old busybody I was making of myself—minding everyone's business but my own. I do not understand exactly why I should have assumed the burden of all those responsibilities; why I should have passed wakeful nights worrying about Florian and Esmée and Deborah, all of whom meant nothing in my life except as their fortunes affected George. If Mrs. Jenks chose to murder her son-in-law, or if her son-in-law chose to murder his own son-in-law, what business was it of mine? Why should I not have let them murder and be damned? I was constituting myself a veritable Sherlock Holmes—a Sherlock whom Scotland Yard had not even called into the case.

And what basis had I after all for my suspicions? Nothing more than the mutterings of Mrs. Jenks and the wrath of Professor Peters. Perhaps I should say the wrath of Professor Peters that had turned to unctuousness with questionable ease—a wrath unlike that vehement, outspoken and enduring wrath of Achilles that hurled so many gallant souls to Hades.

It is probable that my sympathy for Deborah, who had gained my admiration from the first,

played no small part in my willingness to meddle. Deborah amazed me and bewildered me. I had never before seen anyone like her, and she was so perfect, so beautiful a creature that I could not bear to sit by and see any harm befall her. I regarded her as an object of rare art, with something of the feeling perhaps with which Keats looked upon his Grecian urn.


I had an opportunity to speak with Deborah at the wedding breakfast. She was very lovely—and she wore stockings. I had not noticed the stockings until Mary pointed them out to me with favorable comment.

“Deborah,” I said, “you did it very suddenly.”

“Yes,” she answered, “but I love him very much. I shall never be unhappy with Florian.”

“No,” I said, “God willing, I don’t believe you will! But you startled us. Didn’t you startle yourself a little?”

“It was strange—yes, I was surprised—not at myself exactly, but at love. I have read a great deal about love, and love is nothing at all like what I have read. That is why I was surprised. I thought the Greeks and the Romans knew everything about everything, but about love they don’t know as much as I.”



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"Or perhaps," I suggested, "even they had not the words to describe it."

"That is true," she mused. "I had not thought of that. Of course there are no words. One is like a leaf swept away by a great wind. The leaf cannot describe its sensations and it cannot describe the great wind. All it knows is that it is being swept away—and," she added, "that is enough to know."

There was a short pause, and then she asked: "Was Professor Ramsen distressed? Did he feel badly because I had not confided in him?"

"A little, I think—at first. But I think he understands."

I hoped she would say something about George, and the hope—I confess it with shame—was inspired by a curiosity as to what her attitude toward him had been. When she made no reference, however, to my nephew I said jocularly: "Of course George was heart-broken."

She laughed cheerily, as if taking it for granted that I was being sarcastic.

"Poor George!" she exclaimed. "Yes, of course I suppose George was altogether heart-broken." And then more seriously: "He really is very much pleased, isn't he? It was what he hoped for, you see."

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"What he hoped for?" I repeated in astonishment.

"Yes, he introduced Florian to me for that very purpose. He said—George is so funny!—he said that somebody had to get married in this community and he hoped it would be us."

"He said that!" I cried.

"Yes. Isn't he amusing? He's so cautious. The very first time we went for a walk together he explained that you and everyone wanted him to marry, but—how did he put it?—oh, yes, he said: 'My dear Miss Peters, I want to tell you right off the bat that I'm going to fool them all.' How we have laughed about it since! Don't you think it's amusing, Mr. Langley?"

"I think it was very unchivalrous of George," I said.

She glanced up at me with wide eyes to see if I was joking. But I was not joking. I was vexed with George for the moment—very much vexed, doubtless because, true to his word, he had fooled us and in so doing had rendered us ridiculous. Later I obtained a saner perspective and was able to laugh a little over it.

"You don't really think so?" queried Deborah. "Oh, no, I think it was very honorable of him! That is exactly what I like about George

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—he is so frank—at least he has always been so with me.”

“Possibly,” I grumbled. “But not with me.”

“But,” she insinuated gently, “were you **no** a little to blame? You dragged him here, you know, against his will.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “I was a fool.”

“If you were,” she said, “I am very grateful to you, for I benefited by your foolishness. I gained a husband.”

“My dear Deborah,” said I with a bow, “it is Florian who should be grateful to me, for he has gained a wife of surpassing loveliness.”

Then I sought out Annabel to tell her all about it.

## CHAPTER XX

**I** HESITATE to set down the events that follow lest I be accused of marring a hitherto veracious narrative by drawing on my imagination. Nevertheless, if only for the sake of completeness, the thing must be done, and if what I am about to relate be not credited, I can but reply that I have several witnesses of spotless character ready to vouch for its truth.

Annabel was very eager to witness Professor Peters' test of his poison gas. Like me, she was obsessed by a vague uneasiness as to the professor's intentions; she suspected that perhaps the professor did not intend to poison only his chickens; and though she was a little frightened, her fear was nothing in comparison to her curiosity. Florian and Deborah, we knew, were to be present, and if Florian was to be victimized we wanted to be there to help him in any manner possible.

As evidence that Annabel and I were not the only uneasy people, Mrs. Jenks for once since our arrival was not at supper when Bessie rang the bell. When she did appear half an hour late



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she was out of breath and greatly agitated. I surmised that she had run all the way home from the Peters' in order not to miss her evening meal completely. Her spying had evidently been very enthralling on that occasion and I was extremely eager to learn just what she had seen.

Accordingly I lingered over my supper in order to have a word alone with her when the rest should have left. When I say a word I am of course inaccurate, for any interview with the garrulous Mrs. Jenks involved hundreds of words. It happened that she was not at all loath to talk to me and I do not doubt that if I had not sought an opportunity she would have found one herself.

"Young man," she began when Bessie had placed two bowls of custard in front of her and retired to the kitchen—"young man, I don't mind telling you that you're right."

"Right in what?" I inquired.

"In what you suspect," said she. "I have been watching old Peters, and the Lord be praised that I have! He is a poisonous worm."

"Is he?"

"He is! He's as poisonous as his own gas, and that, I guess, is pretty poisonous. He's up to something, that's sure. I'm a defenseless old

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woman, but that much I know. Which one of you does he hate?"

"Great heavens, madam," I exclaimed, "how should I know? He may hate us all."

She shook her head vehemently.

"No, no, there's one of you he hates especially! There's one of you will be sorry if you go to this great show of his to-night. I advise you, if you'll take a poor old widow's advice, to all of you stay away. There's evil in the air. Mark my words—in the air! That's where it'll be, and someone will be driving soon to the burying ground in a glass carriage."

I was startled at the manner in which my worst fears seemed to be verified. Mrs. Jenks' suspicions were in thorough accord with my own, though I fancied I knew the name of the victim, whereas she did not. In this I was mistaken, as she proved by her next words.

"It's that singer that ran away with Deborah, if you want my opinion," she said. "That's the man old Peters hates the worst. You'd better warn him unless you want his blood on your hands. I'd do it myself, only he wouldn't listen to a poor old widow he'd never even been introduced to—not likely. A nice boy too. I liked the way he talked up to old Peters that day in the garden."

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“So you were in the garden?”

“What? Who said I was in the garden? What garden? I didn’t say I was in any garden, though I like gardens and have often been in them. Lovely flowers and everything. At my age you get fond of the beauties of Nature. They’re the only things left to be fond of, and they’re not ungrateful, like humans. Yes, of course I was in old Peters’ garden. Didn’t you see me, or did you think you were seeing ghosts? Young man, I’m apt to be anywhere. Don’t you be surprised if you see me anywhere. When you get to heaven you’ll see me there, sitting up alongside of my dear husband playing harps and eating milk and honey in the streets of the Lord. You’d better hurry along and warn that singing fellow.”

“But what,” I asked, “can I say to him? What do you actually know?”

She glanced round at the doors and windows to see if anyone was eavesdropping; then, lowering her voice to a whisper, she said: “Young man, one of them mask things that you put over your head to keep out the gas is different from the others. That’s the one that the singer gets. I know, because I saw old Peters tinkering with it in his laboratory to-night. That’s what kept me so late.”

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"Perhaps," I suggested, more to draw her out than because I didn't believe her conclusion—"perhaps he was simply adjusting it. Perhaps it was out of order."

"All right," she said, "perhaps it was—perhaps it was. Anyway, the others are all in one pile and that one's by itself and is marked with red chalk so he won't make no mistake and use it himself—the poisonous worm. You'll see for yourself if you're fool enough to go after what I'm telling you."

"Um!" I reflected. "That sounds at least suspicious. I'll warn Florian as you suggest and he can do as he thinks best."

"That's the sensible young man," she said cordially. "You run right along now. I'm going out again. I find the night air's very good for me. Would you mind handing me my cane? At my age I don't get round as well as I used to."

"If that is true," I said gravely, "you must have been a sprinter in your youth."

She gave me what I am sure she intended for a wink and then hobbled away into the night.

I warned Florian. I dragged George out of his room and made him drive me in the yellow runabout to Florian's house, explaining to him on the way what was afoot. George's spirits

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were highly stimulated by my recital and he forthwith decided that nothing should prevent his attending the great experiment.

"I know something about poison gas," said he, "and something more about gas helmets. I'm going to be in on this little shindy myself. It's probably all bosh—nuts out of Mrs. Jenks' nutty brain. But if it isn't and if anything goes wrong I think I can help. By the way, which way is the wind blowing? That's very important."

"It's a sea breeze, I think," I answered, "but it's been veering about all day."

"Well," said George, "we all want to be careful to stand to windward when the professor launches his dirty stuff at the chickens. If we do that we're safe, mask or no mask, unless the wind shifts and blows it back at us."

"I see," said I, and congratulated myself on having enlisted so wise a young man on our side.

We warned Florian, as I said, but he laughed and would not take our warning seriously. I had expected as much. Of course we said nothing to him in front of Deborah and Esmée, though Deborah was planning to go with Florian to witness the experiment. George pointed out quite reasonably that if there were

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any danger in the affair at all it would be for Florian only—that the rest of us would be as safe as Peters himself. Having said this, George suddenly became silent and, retreating to a corner of the room, announced that he had an idea and would be grateful if we would leave him alone while he developed it. There was in his eyes a strange triumphant glint that I imagined must have been in them when he attacked a German ten thousand feet in the air.

Considerably mystified, we left him to perfect whatever scheme was in his brain and joined Deborah and Esmée in the living room. George did not appear for about ten minutes, and then he thrust his head in at the door and said to me with his habitual cheerful grin: “Did you say red chalk, Uncle Foster?”

“Yes—red.”

He nodded.

“That makes it harder,” he remarked. “Esmée, have you any red chalk in the house?”

“My God, no!” said Esmée. “What should I do with red chalk? I have a rouge stick.”

“No good,” said George. “I’ll jump into the car and rout out that old fellow that owns the hardware store. He ought to have some. I’ll be back in a minute.”

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"The boy is mad," observed Esmée as my nephew tore out of the house.

But Florian smiled and said: "With method, though, my dear."

I am not very nimble-witted, but even I had an inkling of what George was up to. The fact that, as Mrs. Jenks had informed me, the helmet destined for Florian's use had been marked with red chalk was a significant hint. A few more helmets similarly marked with red chalk and shuffled up together—well, that was as far as I got, but it was far enough to convince me that George was nothing less than a young Napoleon.

The young Napoleon returned in twenty minutes bearing the red chalk. It was then approaching ten o'clock.

"Two hours more," said George cheerfully. "I'm getting quite excited over this experiment. Very interested, I am, in science. Beautiful ladies, will you let me borrow Florian from you for a few minutes? I want to show him what pretty pictures I can draw with my chalk."

Esmée looked at George and tapped her forehead solemnly.

"He's mad—quite mad," she said, "or else he's intoxicated."

"You said it, Esmée!" George assured her.

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"But lend me Florian just the same. Come on, Uncle Foster, we'll leave these most lovely ladies to their own devices. Deborah can read Aristophanes aloud while Esmée knits. I'll return him in fifteen minutes," he called out as we climbed into the runabout.

George stopped the car a hundred yards from the house.

"This is all right," he said. "I just wanted perfect privacy while I explain my genial idea. It's this way: Florian's gas helmet is set aside by itself in the professor's laboratory and it's marked with red chalk so that the professor will be sure not to make any mistake about it and perhaps put it on his own precious snout. That helmet is supposedly imperfect—either a hole in it or no chemicals in it or something of the sort. The others are in good order and they're piled up together indiscriminately.

"Well, here's my proposition: I'll go up ahead of all you others to have a chat with Peters—tell him I've come to lend a hand. He won't suspect anything, because he thinks he's got everything so perfectly fixed that there can't be any hitch. I'll putter round in his laboratory until you arrive, and when you arrive you must set up a jolly shout outside so he'll go out for a second to meet you. In that



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second I'll grab the rotten helmet and hide it and I'll take a good one from the pile and mark it with red chalk just like the rotten one. Do you get that? Then we'll all have perfectly good helmets and no lives lost—see? What a brain—ah, what a brain! Colossal! No wonder I never got promoted!"

We agreed as to the magnificence of his brain. It was a solution that could do no harm, even if the professor intended no harm, and if the professor had criminal intentions it would frustrate them completely.

"If by any chance I can't pull it off," said George as we deposited Florian on his doorstep, "I'll warn you, and then the only thing for Florian to do is to decide suddenly not to stay for the show. Give up your ticket at the box office and ask for your money back. So long, Florian. As long as it isn't mustard gas you're safe."

## CHAPTER XXI

**I**T was one of those tropical starlit nights that come occasionally in late summer.

There was a light breeze blowing in from the sea, just enough to stir the tops of the trees and to waft the scent of full-blown flowers from unseen gardens. The moon had not yet risen, but the stars were strewn lavishly across the sky, flooding the earth with a radiance so silver-white that it was almost as if frost lay on the ground.

George and Annabel and I sat out on the lawn under the horse-chestnut trees and talked desultorily in whispers. At eleven o'clock George started for the Peters' house, leaving us the runabout, in which we were to follow him shortly before midnight. We wished him good luck as earnestly as if he were departing for the Front. All of us, I think, were a little nervous. I know that I had a strange, palpitating sensation at my heart. Probably we were taking the affair far too seriously.

When George had left us we sat in silence for a while. Annabel, leaning back in an old

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rocking-chair, was a splash of white, except where the starlight struck the gold of her hair. She was so lovely that half unconsciously I leaned over and placed my hand over hers where it rested on the arm of the chair. She looked up and smiled a little, and then she covered my hand with her other.

"Annabel!" I said hoarsely, and I felt as if wild horses were running away with my senses.

She said nothing, but—her eyes on mine—continued to smile—sympathetically, gently, as one smiles on a child.

"Annabel," I repeated, "am I an old fool?"

The smile deepened at the corners of her mouth.

"That," she said softly, "depends on what you say next."

I don't remember what I said next. I hope it was adequate. All I remember is that I found myself kneeling beside her, stammering incoherent phrases. I think I must have appeared very ridiculous, but she assures me I did not. Thank God she is prejudiced in my favor! The miracle of it—that Annabel should love a middle-aged, well-nigh confirmed bachelor—the wonderful miracle of it!

"Don't you understand," she said—"don't you understand? That is why I came here to

Sun Harbor. Oh, you have been so blind! I've tried to be demure and maidenly and all that, but how could you help but see?"


"When one looks at the sun one goes blind," I said. "I don't know. I thought of course it was George. I mean it would have been only natural if it had been George. He's so young and he's very good-looking."

Then she laughed.

"George!" she exclaimed. "Why, I defy anyone to fall in love with George! If George's heart ever had an unexpected throb he would send for a doctor. I'm very fond of George, but—well, no—he's too cautious a young man when it comes to risking his heart. He'll never marry unless some Amazon chloroforms him and drags him to the altar, and I never thought for a minute of performing that ungrateful rôle. No, Foster—do you mind if I say I prefer a willing bridegroom?"

"Beloved," I answered, "you shall have your wish." And I took her in my arms.

The page that I had written to follow this is omitted at Annabel's request. She says that it is maudlin. I don't doubt it. But in these days of facts, figures and efficiency I think it should be a relief to indulge in a bit of maudlinness.



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Of course I forgot Professor Peters and the great experiment and the passage of time. Had it not been for Annabel we should have missed the entire performance. But she, with her customary logic, pointed out that we had a lifetime ahead of us in which to contemplate the stars but only one opportunity of witnessing the triumph of the marvelous poison gas. So she led me firmly to the runabout and drove me to Professor Peters' gate.

We found George and the professor together in the laboratory and in accordance with the plan we called loudly for the professor. As we had hoped, he came outside to greet us. We delayed him as long as we decently could in order to give George plenty of time to perform his sleight-of-hand work with the gas helmets.

"A wonderful night for the test, I should think," observed Annabel.

The professor studied the heavens critically and wet his finger to assure himself of the direction of the wind.

"A very satisfactory night," said he, "unless the wind starts shifting about. It has been unsteady most of the day, with occasional gusts from the shore. Now, however, it seems to have settled into a more or less steady sea breeze.

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Won't you come into the laboratory? I expect Deborah and—and Florian any moment."

We followed him into his workshop. It was littered with trays and test tubes and burners and crucibles, and it was pervaded by a most unpleasant odor—an odor that I can only compare to the taste of a bad oyster.

George said "Hello" carelessly, and when Peters' back was turned he winked and nodded at us, so I inferred that so far everything had progressed satisfactorily. I immediately looked for the pile of gas helmets and discovered them, just as Mrs. Jenks had reported, piled on a table in the corner; perhaps a dozen of them together, but one, marked in red chalk with a large cross, set aside from the pile. I confess that I was greatly amused at the thought of George's strategy and the prospects of its complete success.

I was still chuckling to myself when Florian and Deborah arrived. I saw Florian glance inquiringly at George as he shook him by the hand, and my nephew, grinning cheerfully, murmured: "Right as rain, old dear."

The professor cleared his throat, advanced to the center of the room and motioned for silence. He obtained it in its fullest perfection.

"My friends," he began formally, like the

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pompous old ass that he was—"my friends, before proceeding to the experiment it would be advisable and perhaps interesting to explain as briefly as possible what I propose to do. First, with your permission, I will show you the gas container which I shall use and which, if I may say so, is my own invention and unlike anything heretofore employed for the purpose. It is true that it is derived from the test containers used by the British early in the war for collecting samples of the German gas; but it is on a far more elaborate scale than those of the British. The fact that it is made of glass renders it useless of course for actual field work but at the same time invaluable for experimental work, since the operator can observe the action of the gas within the container."

At this point the professor took down from a shelf a curiously shaped object of glass, fashioned in general along the lines of an ordinary garden waterpot. It was about eighteen inches in diameter and three feet high, and it differed from a waterpot in that the top of the container was closed. The end of the spout too was carefully sealed, but a lever was attached to it by means of which, as the professor explained, the gas could be released in any quantity desired. At present the container was full.

"You will note," said the professor, "that the gas is not liquefied. This can only be done under extreme pressure and the glass is not solid enough to resist the pressure required. But it is my intention to release only an infinitesimal amount, and I am convinced that a cubic inch will be sufficient to kill the chickens. A larger amount would endanger the whole neighborhood—something that I am reluctant to do, though it would be of extreme interest and value in proving my contention that this is the most powerful and deadly weapon ever invented.

"And now one word as to the actual operation: We shall place ourselves to windward of the chicken coops and about twenty feet distant from them. We shall all wear our masks. When I release the small amount of gas necessary I shall turn back the lever, thus resealing the container. You will remain where you are, but I shall advance with the gas to the coop in order to witness its effect on the chickens. I shall be in no danger, for the quantity of gas will, as I say, be extremely small and I shall of course be protected by my mask. The masks, I may add, are amply sufficient for this purpose, though—and I say this with all due modesty—there is no mask made that could withstand my



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gas if it were released in large quantities. That is about all, I believe. We will now proceed to the adjustment of the masks."

As the professor ceased speaking I turned my eyes from him, and for some reason—or for no reason perhaps—glanced at the laboratory window. I think that my heart must have dropped half a dozen beats at what I saw—dropped them and then raced to regain them. There it was again, that wrinkled, yellow face with the vicious red eyes peering in at us through the pane! Mrs. Jenks was still at her work of spying. Even as I looked she ducked her head and disappeared—amazing old wretch, possessed of the agility of a cat and all of a cat's stealthy slyness!

No one, I am sure, saw her but myself, and I said nothing. What was there to say? The old woman, through the information her spying had gleaned for her, had been able to warn us of Florian's danger. If then her spying had helped us in one instance, why should we resent it now? No, we must, however reluctantly, accept her into our camp. She was our spy. So I said nothing.

But my attention was now directed to the professor, who had begun adjusting a gas mask on Annabel. I saw that it was one from the pile of

those in perfect condition, but I waited eagerly for Florian's turn to come. These masks were hideous things—so hideous that even Annabel's amazing beauty was overwhelmed, and she resembled—I am sure, for the only time in her life—some horrible goggle-eyed monster.

After Annabel came Deborah. The professor himself did all the work of fitting and adjusting, and he did it with painstaking care. After Deborah came George, and George astounded both Florian and myself by reaching for the supposedly imperfect mask marked with red chalk.

"What's the matter with this one, professor?" he asked casually.

The professor snatched it quickly from his hand and then he dealt us an enormous surprise.

"I ought to have warned you," he said. "That one is comparatively useless. I have been working over it for some time, endeavoring to correct its defects, but I am not going to risk using it. That is why I set it aside and marked it with chalk. In a family party like this," he added benignly, "one does not wish to take chances—even of the slightest."

There went the wind from our sails! There went all our suspicions crashing to the ground! And there went George's magnificent scheme to

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naught! We had been as silly as schoolboys trying to play a blood-thirsty game! Our arch villain had proved himself to be as harmless as a lamb. I admit that I was just a little disappointed, but I almost laughed aloud at the woe-begone, chagrined face of my nephew. Poor George, just as he was anticipating a smattering of intrigue and excitement as a welcome relief to the monotony of existence at Sun Harbor! As soon as I had an opportunity I whispered to him in an endeavor to console him.

"Cheer up, George," I said, "there is always Mrs. Jenks left."

He brightened visibly.

"Do you think she'll start something?" he asked.

"I don't know, but she has been peering in through the window at us."

"Fine!" said he. "The old lady may mean business."

When all of us had been carefully helmeted, the professor led the way to the chicken run. This was at the back of the house near the vegetable garden, and was even more unkempt than the rest of the property. It lay in what I judged to be a fairly recent clearing cut out of the heart of a woods of birches and small pines, and was shut off from the woods by a grove of

rhododendrons. Large boulders and stumps of trees still remained in the clearing, except of course in the portions actually devoted to the growing of vegetables and the exercising of chickens.

We found the white Wyandotte rooster and the two hens sleeping the pleasant, unworried sleep of ignorance. Poor creatures, little did they realize that never again would they salute the rising sun or go grubbing happily after worms! But after all, I reflected, what more glorious death could one desire than to die for the advancement of science—to die in order to prove that some eminent chemist's poison gas is really poisonous—to die in order that millions more may be killed? Had the white chanticleer but known, I doubt not he must have crowed his gratitude.

The professor, who had not yet donned his mask, squinted an appraising eye at the heavens, studied the weather vane on the roof of his laboratory and, apparently satisfied, set down his lantern about twenty feet from the chickens.

"We are now," he announced, "in the correct position to windward, granting that the wind does not veer. To be truthful, the only factor that distresses me is the instability of

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the weather vane. However, with our masks we shall be in no danger even if the wind does shift."

Nobody volunteered a remark, for conversation was difficult with an uncomfortable mouth-piece between the teeth. We waited silently while the professor deposited the glass container very, very carefully beside the lantern. We were like six ugly toads crouching about the light. I am sure that had any uninvited person stumbled upon us he would have taken us for evil spirits about to perform some sacrifice to the devil, our master.

It was now about one o'clock and the moon, coming up over the tree tops, deepened the shadows that the taller birches and pines cast across the clearing. As the sea breeze freshened a little these shadows swayed and clutched fantastically at each other and assumed strange animal-like shapes. Annabel put her hand into mine. Her hand was very cold. I have no doubt that my hand was cold too.

The professor adjusted his mask. He seemed awkward about it and I fancied that his fingers were shaking. He was so long about the operation that had he been in the trenches during a gas attack he would certainly have been done for. He annoyed me. His slowness irritated

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me. I wished that he had been in the trenches. I squeezed Annabel's hand and then I patted it reassuringly. I would have smiled to encourage her, but what was the use? No smile could penetrate those hideous masks.

At length the professor was ready. He lined us up along an imaginary line at a safe distance behind the gas container. He crouched down on his haunches and cautiously pressed the lever at the end of the spigot. There issued forth immediately a small dense cloud of yellowish-green smoke—opalescent, I might call it. At first it hung near the ground, curling and coiling in a fan-shaped mass, and then, borne forward by a mild gust of wind, it rolled over and over in fat round waves toward the unsuspecting Wyandotte rooster and his female friends.

The professor moved back the lever at this point, shutting off a further supply of the gas, and, motioning to us to stay where we were, he advanced boldly into the midst of the cloud.

And then a horrible thing occurred. It occurred so quickly that the damage was done before we had time to realize the danger. I, who was more on the alert than the others, was, I believe, the first to hear the sudden crashing in the rhododenrons. I turned quickly, just in

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time to see the figure of Mrs. Jenks break through into the clearing. She was waving her arms and bounding toward us with a horrible agility. Her hair was streaming out from under her bonnet, her clothes were flapping about her shrunken body, her eyes were red in the moonlight. She was a sight to strike terror to the bravest. I am sure that she struck me with terror, and the only creditable move that I made was to step between her and Annabel.

But Mrs. Jenks did not bother to molest us. On the contrary she changed her direction and made for the gas container which the professor had left behind him on the ground. Before any of us could gather together wits enough to intercept her she had pounced on the container, seized it in her bony, clawlike hands, raised it high in the air and with amazing force had dashed it down against a boulder. There was a great crash and the glass flew in a thousand fragments.

What followed immediately I remember vaguely. I remember the huge mass of opalescent smoke that came seething out round us; I remember Mrs. Jenks' voice rising shrilly and triumphantly out of the cloud that engulfed her; I remember hearing the professor cry out in fear and horror, urging us to run; I remem-

ber seizing Annabel by the arm and racing with her to the road that led to the sea.

At the time I cared not a penny what happened to anyone but Annabel. The professor and Mrs. Jenks could smother along with the chickens if only I could get Annabel safely away. To George I gave a brief thought. But I reasoned—if indeed I was capable of reasoning—that George could take care of himself. The last thing that I heard, and the thing that spurred me on to prodigious speed, was the muffled voice of the professor crying: “Make for the ocean!”

Well, we made for the ocean!

When Annabel and I had covered perhaps a hundred yards I ventured to look back over my shoulder. Fast as we had run, we had not, I discovered, run much faster than others, for almost directly behind us were Florian and Deborah. They motioned us ahead, and we did not delay for further observations.

“Are you all right?” I shouted at Annabel. “Can you keep it up?”

“Yes,” she panted, “if it weren’t for this mask.”

“Don’t take it off!” I yelled. “Whatever you do, don’t take it off!”

At the corner by the Hoffman Arms we were



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forced to stop for breath, and moreover I was anxious to hold a consultation with Florian, providing of course that we were in no imminent danger. Thanks to the fact that we had been running against the wind, we had left the gas cloud well in our rear, and as long as the wind did not shift we were justified in feeling reasonably secure. Nevertheless, as I looked back and saw the opalescent cloud hovering murderously over the professor's house I could not repress a shudder. It hung about the place like an unquiet mist, no higher than the eaves of the house and not so high as the tops of the taller trees; and its movements were sluggish and reluctant. It seemed to have reached no very definite decision as to what direction it would pursue. Perhaps, I thought—perhaps because the breeze also had reached no very definite decision. And the instant that this thought entered my mind a puff of wind from inland swayed the tall grass. The wind had shifted!

When Florian drew up abreast of us we lifted our gas masks and I informed him in a whisper of my unpleasant discovery.

"That," said he, "is very serious."

"Yes," I agreed; "what shall we do? Rouse the village? It's in danger, I suppose. And all

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my friends at the Hoffman Arms ought to be warned."

"Of course," said he; "and there is Esmée."

"Did you see anything of George?" I asked.

"I saw him disappear into the woods after Mrs. Jenks," said Florian. "He's probably taking a short cut. He'll be all right, but how about Professor Peters?"

"That," I answered, "is to me a matter of no importance at all. I'm thinking of the people that are worth saving."

Florian shrugged.

"Well," he said, "if that gas is as powerful as Peters says it is there will be no saving accomplished—unless of course the wind changes again. As it is now, it's bound to get us; and if the wind freshens up a little it will get us soon. I suggest you get your friends out of the Hoffman Arms. I'll give the alarm to the village and hurry along and rouse Esmée. The two girls will come with me and we'll meet you about a mile beyond Esmée's house."

His plan seemed reasonable, and we explained it as rapidly as possible to Annabel and Deborah. Both of them were reluctant to leave me, but I made them realize that I could work more quickly without them.

Accordingly we separated, I going into the

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Hoffman Arms and the others continuing down toward the village and the sea.

I banged on Mary's door first, telling her that there had been an accident and urging her to put on some clothes as quickly as possible. She wanted of course to know why and where and when, but I succeeded in alarming her so thoroughly that for once in her life she really hurried with success. The admiral and the Ramsen twins joined me almost instantly; and I yelled up the service stairs to Mr. Hoffman, telling him to get out, as the house was on fire. That too proved a successful stimulant to haste, and once he and the servants were roused I was able to explain. They thought me mad—as was only natural—but perceiving that we were all earnestly mad, at any rate, they decided to be on the safe side and follow us.

So we started out, a strange group of disheveled, half-dressed figures, running in the moonlight toward the sea.

Mary, not having been blessed at birth with the lines of a greyhound, ran very poorly indeed, and I felt duty bound to remain with her behind the others. After fifty yards or so she gave up any attempt at speed and settled down into a panting, alarmed walk. The admiral, falling back to aid me, dragged her by one arm

and I by the other, but even with this assistance it was apparent that we were not traveling as fast as the wind, and I had been given to understand that the poison gas attained exactly that speed. Yes, as I looked back at the Peters house I perceived that the opalescent cloud had gained on us perceptibly. Indeed, detached fragments of the deadly smoke eddied and swirled about the tree trunks not two hundred yards behind us. All I could do, alas, was to pray that the wind would veer round again and blow from the ocean.

At the village we encountered great confusion. Evidently Florian had dashed through it like a Paul Revere, rapping at every house door; but evidently also he had not been so explicit as Paul in explaining just what trouble was afoot. The appearance of our wild-eyed group, and especially of me in my gas mask, however, must have carried conviction to the most incredulous—we were so openly and unashamedly in a hurry. A forest fire perhaps? The fishermen and their wives and their children did not know—would not have understood had we tried to explain. But, wondering and alarmed, they joined us in our race to the sea.

I had arranged with Florian, as I have said, that we should meet at a point on the beach

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about a mile beyond Esmée's house, whence if it were necessary we could continue our fight together. How I cursed the sybaritic tastes of Asa, the chauffeur, that had deprived us of the use of our touring car, for Florian's car and Annabel's roadster had been left at the Peters house smothered in the poison gas. And how I cursed the folly that had induced us to venture to Sun Harbor! And then I thought of Annabel and—well, I ceased to curse the folly so heartily. After all I had gained her. It but remained to save her life and mine for further use.

Silently, except for our panting, we struggled along down that shore road. At times I fancied that I detected once more a sea breeze on my cheek and finally I asked the admiral for his opinion. He sniffed, held up a moistened finger and shook his head dubiously.

"I don't think there's any wind at all," he said. "It's a dead calm."

"Thank God at least for that!" I exclaimed.

Mary then desired to know why I was interested in the wind, but I told her to conserve her breath for breathing purposes only.

We passed Esmée's house—dark, silent, apparently deserted. At this point I called a short halt and, removing my gas mask, insisted on giving it to Mary. I had not thought to per-

form this piece of chivalry earlier, I am ashamed to say, and I wonder if it was even eleventh-hour chivalry that prompted me then and not rather a desire to keep her silent.

At the designated point we descended to the beach, stumbling about among the rocks and undergrowth. To my intense relief we discovered Annabel, Deborah, Esmée and Florian sitting quietly and patiently in a circle on the sand. Florian, I noted, had transferred his mask to Esmée. At a short distance from the group three of Esmée's servants sat huddled together, shivering and moaning with fright.

We stretched our exhausted bodies prone on the sand and waited in silence. There was nothing else to do. I lay back beside Annabel and hand in hand we gazed up at the moon, and I reflected that I had in my life passed many far more disagreeable hours. I was filled with a great wave of irresponsibility for whatever might happen. I had done my best and the future lay in the hands of Fate. If Annabel and I should be spared, why, so much the better; but if not, it was an excellent thing that we should die together, side by side, hand in hand, with the stars singing antiphons to the sea. I steeped myself in the sensuousness of melancholy.

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Of a sudden I sat erect. I had sensed an indubitable breeze fresh with the salt of the ocean—a breeze so buoyant, so lusty that it sang through the branches of the trees behind us. The admiral, too, was on his feet in an instant.

“There we are!” said he. “Just what the doctor ordered!”

There was no doubt about it at all. The breeze gained in strength even while he spoke. I forgot my pleasant melancholy in my reaction to delirious joy. I leaned over and unfastened Annabel’s helmet, and I’m proud to say that before them all I kissed her rapturously and thoroughly on the lips. As soon as she could she smiled at me, her eyes glistening in the moonlight. Then she patted her hair into place and stood up slowly and serenely.

“Can we go home now?” she asked.

“In a very short while, I think.”

She put her arms round my neck and rested her head on my shoulder.

“I’m so sleepy, dear,” she murmured.

When I looked at Mary she was struggling to register what must have been very poignant emotions through her gas helmet.

## CHAPTER XXII

**H**OW shall I describe that return to the Hoffman Arms? So many exciting events in the course of a single night had rendered Mary almost hysterical, and for once I cannot find the heart to blame her. The knowledge alone that Annabel and I were engaged would have been enough to upset what little self-control she possessed. I may add that even the admiral and the two Ramsens exhibited marked symptoms of bewilderment. It was a sudden and unexpected blow for them, I suppose, for long ago they had put me definitely in the pigeonhole of confirmed bachelorhood. Annabel was the only one of us who retained her calm. Annabel was wonderful—was and still is, for that matter.

We waited on the beach for another half hour in order to be sure that all danger was past. Then we stumbled up to the road. Reaction was upon us and we dragged ourselves along in silence, except for Mary, who incessantly wept and complained. We left Esmée, Deborah and Florian at their house.



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"My God," said Esmée, "what a night it has been! Like a nightmare! Come to see us tomorrow and we will drink to the latest happy couple."

As we passed through the village we noted that the inhabitants, like ourselves, were returning to their homes. They regarded us with suspicion not unmixed with anger. I think they believed they had been made the victims of some preposterous practical joke. One of the fishermen expressed his conviction when he called out to us angrily: "Where do you city folks get all that liquor from?"

We answered nothing to the accusation, but Mary redoubled her sobs. I had not thought it possible. Compared with Mary, Niobe was dry-eyed.

When we had traversed the village I insisted that the women once more don their gas helmets. Even though the breeze had grown to the dimensions of a good strong blow, I cared to take no chances of running into some lurking remnant of the deadly stuff, which, as I knew, had a nasty habit of clinging tenaciously to the hollows of the ground. But as a matter of fact, we encountered no trace of it.

At the Hoffman Arms we took leave of Annabel, Mary and the Ramsens, and the admiral

and I set out to look for George. My nephew was now my only anxiety. Mrs. Jenks and the professor I had given up for lost, for the former had worn no mask and the latter had been in the thick of the gas cloud, which in its full intensity he had assured us no mask could withstand.

The admiral and I proceeded very slowly and cautiously in the direction of the Peters' house. As we advanced I glanced up at the sky and perceived that over in the east it was growing lighter. Overhead ragged wind clouds were hurrying pell-mell across the already paling stars.

"Dawn," I said to myself. And then I added: "Thank God!"

At the front gate of the Peters' we came upon Annabel's runabout, the lamps still lit and glowing like the eyes of some great yellow-bodied animal. Beyond it stood Florian's car, its black coloring blending into the night.

We opened the gate. Lights were burning in the house, but there was no sound, except that of the wind whining through the birches and pines. We circled the house stealthily, like burglars planning an entry. Here and there, swirling vaguely in the low levels of the ground, we saw traces of the opalescent gas, but the

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traces were slight and we both were equipped with our helmets. Finally we reached the clearing, and there beside the bowlder lay the scattered fragments of the glass container. With a shudder I directed the admiral's attention to Mrs. Jenks' handiwork and we stood for a while contemplating it in silence. Then once more I turned my eyes to the eastern horizon. Just above the rim of the ocean there was a warm glow in the sky and on the ocean itself lay a faint tinge of copper. As their setting merged from black to gray to pale blue the stars slipped away one by one and presently the sun edged up over the sea and it was dawn.

. At that very instant there rang out beside us into the morning air, like a loud triumphant bugle, the crowing of a cock. It was the white Wyandotte rooster saluting the sun and proclaiming himself alive!

I was far more astounded than the admiral. He of course did not grasp the full significance of the rooster's chant—did not realize that if anyone or anything should have been dead it was that very rooster. But I—I stood amazed, almost unwilling to believe. And then I tore my gas helmet from my head and began to laugh insanely. I laughed for a long time. It seemed as if I should never be able to cease from laugh-

ing. And while I laughed chanticleer crowed again and his friends the hens set up a busy, contented clucking.

I went over to the chicken run and surveyed them. I bowed gravely to the rooster.

"I trust you are in good health this morning," I said.

He winked a slow eye at me, stretched his neck, flapped his wings and affirmed that he was.

"Well," I said, "you can thank whatever god you do thank that Professor Peters' wonderful poison gas is a complete failure. It is evidently as harmless as eau de Cologne."



## CHAPTER XXIII

**T**HE admiral and I returned to the Hoffman Arms, exhausted from our exertions. The admiral, in no very genial humor, was unable to see any comedy in the situation. He had been robbed, he protested, of a good night's sleep for no good reason at all; and not only had he been robbed of his sleep but he had been made to race about the country like a madman and to crouch on the uncomfortable beach throughout a long ridiculous night. Moreover, he wanted to know what had come over Annabel and me. What did all this public affection indicate? Had I taken leave of my senses in my old age?

I explained as best I could, pointing out that I still clung to my forties and was therefore just in my prime; that I was as surprised as he, nevertheless, that Annabel should care for me in anything but a daughterly manner; and that I was, of course, the most fortunate and happiest person in the world. But the admiral merely grunted.

"That breaks up our household, I suppose," he complained. And then for decency's sake he

extended his hand and said: "All right, Foster. Good luck to you, old man—I mean young man."

At the Hoffman Arms we found some confusion. George had returned leading, or—as I suspect—carrying, Mrs. Jenks. He had pursued her through the woods—pursued her far before capturing her. And the old lady, even when captured, had displayed an amazing amount of fight. She had resisted every step of the way home. She was still resisting when we entered the front hall, and she had planted herself on the lowest step of the staircase and was clinging to the newel post with the strength of despair. Annabel and George were standing over her, helpless.

"I will not go to my room!" said she. "I have been cruelly treated and I will not go to my room! I am taking the morning train for New York—and a most uncomfortable train it is too." And then as she perceived the admiral and me she cried: "Here's two men that have reached the age of chivalry. They won't stand by and see a poor widow molested!"

George drew me aside and whispered: "I caught her all right, but it was hard work. She ought to be locked up, I think. Did she do for the professor?"

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"No," I replied, "fortunately the gas was harmless. We've just come from the Peters' and even the chickens are alive. The professor is probably running wild somewhere round the country. He'll be badly disappointed when he realizes his gas wasn't effective enough to kill him."

"Well," said George slowly, "I'll—be—damned! I certainly will be damned! What shall we do then with the old lady?"

"I think," I answered, "that that depends a great deal on what the old lady is willing to let us do for her. Her grip on the newel post seems at present to be firm and relentless. I suggest we let her alone."

"Still," objected George, "she tried to do murder. It isn't her fault she didn't succeed."

"Call in the sheriff if you want, only I don't believe the sheriff would be disposed to do anything we might suggest. You see we roused the entire village on what they no doubt consider false pretenses. I shouldn't be surprised if the rest of our stay were made a little uncomfortable for us."

At this point the admiral interrupted with the announcement that he was going to bed and did not care to be disturbed until afternoon.

"And what's more," he added, "if any of you

have any sense you'll all do the same and leave Mrs. Jenks alone with her newel post."

George hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders and followed the admiral up the stairs.

"Go ahead, Annabel," I said. "The admiral's right. Good night, Mrs. Jenks."

"Good night," she returned sulkily. "I'll wait here for the morning train."

"Aren't you going to pack?" I suggested.

At that she roused herself as if I had confronted her with a proposition that hitherto she had overlooked. She rose with great dignity.

"Young man," she said, "I thank you for reminding me." And very docilely she went up to her room. Annabel and I followed after.

Strange to say, on the next day we discovered that it was not Mrs. Jenks who had taken the morning train, but George. He had left a brief note for me under my door, which I quote. It read:

*"Dear Uncle Foster: I am getting out of this rotten old hole as quickly and quietly as possible. My attempts at matrimony are not a success—no one will have me. First Florian grabs Deborah and then you yourself, you old fox, grab Annabel. In despair the other day I pro-*



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posed to Esmée and she said she wouldn't marry me for worlds. I knew she'd say that. Perhaps if I hadn't known it I shouldn't have chanced it.

"But I wanted to prove to you all my appreciation of your efforts to marry me off by leaving no stone unturned. I am going round the world and hope to pick up a black wife or two in Siam or the South Sea Islands. I understand black women are more susceptible. Perhaps I shall bring home six or eight.

"Thanking you for your kindness, and wishing you and Annabel the best of luck and happiness, I am yours with my heart broken three times,

GEORGE."

"What a boy!" I exclaimed to myself when I had read this debonair effusion. "What a boy, to be sure! He makes a joke of everything."

When I read it to Annabel she said: "Isn't that typical of George? Nothing in the world would have induced him to marry anyone. He was simply having huge fun at your expense."

"But," I complained, "didn't any of you—you or Deborah or Esmée ever take him seriously?"

Annabel laughed.

"Of course not," she said. "Don't you sup-

pose a woman can tell when a man is in earnest?"

"I don't know," I said ruefully. "But I do know that a man can't always tell when a woman is in earnest."

"That," she affirmed, "is different. But if it will relieve your mind at all I'll assure you that I'm in earnest, now and forever."

"My mind is relieved," I said gravely; and it was only Mary's arrival on the scene that put an end to a very pleasant embrace.

The midday meal at the Hoffman Arms was—except for myself and, I hope, for Annabel—a sad, mournful affair. Mary, I could see, was planning to have words with me as soon as she should be able to get me alone. Naturally she wanted to know all about Annabel and by what supposedly underhand methods I had seduced her young affections; and it was quite evident that I was in for a bad half hour, for Mary was sure to resort to tears in moments of joy, sorrow or excitement. Besides, what woman is there that doesn't weep on the occasion of her offspring's betrothal?

But Mrs. Jenks, who to our astonishment made her appearance at the dinner table, was the cause of the greater agitation. She came hobbling into the room with her cane, just as if

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the night before she had not qualified as a first-class sprinter, and taking her seat with her customary calm she attacked her soup as vigorously and as noisily as ever. When she had finished her first portion she called upon Bessie for a second one, adding: "I am hungry after all my exercise of last night." Then she looked up at me and said brightly: "Well, did I kill old Peters?"

A shudder swept round the table. Mary emitted a little scream. The Ramsen twins ceased abruptly to eat. They were not as yet cognizant of all the details of last night's near-tragedy.

"No," I answered, "I don't believe you succeeded in killing Professor Peters. His gas, you see, happened to be nonpoisonous. It was not your fault you didn't succeed—it was his."

"Everything's always his fault," grumbled the terrible old woman. "How can anyone kill a man that's forever making silly mistakes? My poor husband never made a mistake in his life and look where he is now—in the grave. Where's young George?"

"Young George has left us in disgust," I said. "And all of us are leaving you this afternoon in disgust."

"Good riddance too," commented Mrs. Jenks. "You were beginning to get on my nerves, which have been sensitive since girlhood."

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Here Hector Ramsen interposed a question.

"Are you sure, Foster," he asked me—"are you sure that poor Peters is all right? I think I will go over and see him immediately. It must be a severe blow to him to realize that his gas is a failure. Perhaps I can comfort him a little."

The big-hearted little man put his napkin on the table and rose to his feet. As he did so Professor Peters himself came staggering into the room like a wounded bird. Hector rushed to him and, putting his arms round his shoulders to steady him, led him to a chair.

"Hector, Hector," gasped Peters, "it is a failure! A complete failure! Have they told you?"

"Yes, Joshua," answered Hector, patting his shoulder. "Yes, I know. I am very sorry—I am extremely sorry."


"You oughtn't to be then," growled Mrs. Jenks; "that is, if you care anything for Joshua Peters."

Hector blinked.

"That's so," he murmured. "I hadn't thought of that."

At the sound of Mrs. Jenks' voice Peters raised his head fiercely.

"So the old she-devil is still here!" he exclaimed.



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"Yes, I'm here, and here I'll stay," said she, translating unconsciously the famous remark of MacMahon before Malakoff. "Bessie, I'll thank you for a little more of the custard."

Peters looked about him helplessly.

"What shall I do with her?" he groaned.  
"What shall I do with her?"

His fat little body heaved with emotion and I could see that his inadequate legs were shaking violently.

"Look here, Joshua Peters," commanded Mrs. Jenks, pointing a spoon at him. "I can have you taken up for attempted murder. You tried to murder your own son-in-law. You gave your own son-in-law one of them mask things that you'd been tinkering with all day. I seen you do the tinkering myself—with my own eyes, looking through your laboratory window. Now deny that if you can!"

While Professor Peters' face registered the most utter astonishment I intervened.

"That is not so, Mrs. Jenks," said I firmly. "That is not so, and Annabel and I can swear that it is not so. We were there when the masks were distributed and Professor Peters especially warned us not to make use of the defective one. He admitted that it was defective, but said that he had endeavored to remedy the

defects. That no doubt was the tinkering in which you saw him engaged."

I think that Mrs. Jenks was for once staggered. The hand that held the custard spoon dropped slowly to the table and her head tilted forward on her scrawny neck. Then she appealed to Annabel.

"How about that, you blond baby?" she asked. "Is that the truth?"

"That is the absolute truth," asserted Annabel.

There followed a silence. Mrs. Jenks' stiff body relaxed and sank in her chair. All the fire departed from her eyes. Her hands trembled on the table.

"God forgive me, then, for I'm a miserable sinner!" she muttered.

I had no pity for her.

"It might be equally important," I suggested, "to ask that Professor Peters forgive you."

The old woman hesitated—loath, I suppose, to humble herself before anyone short of the Deity. At length she turned to the professor.

"I'm sorry, Joshua," she said in her hoarse, bass whisper. "I'm sorry. I thought you meant to kill that Florian just because he made music. I know how you hate all them that make music. But I did you wrong and I'm

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sorry. I'll not bother you any more. Only I'd like to see Deborah once before I go. In spite of myself I love that girl—and I want her happy. Will you let me see her just once, Joshua?"

Old sentimentalist that I am, I confess that her very self-abasement moved me. It must have had its effect on Peters, too, for he regarded her in a bewildered manner, much as one might regard Mr. Hyde changing to Doctor Jekyll. Hector patted him again on the shoulder.

"Be easy on her, Joshua," he whispered—"be easy on her. She's doing all she can."

Then Peters rose to great heights.

"Don't bother about all that," he said to Mrs. Jenks with a wave of his hand. "That will be all right. It's a trivial matter compared with the failure of my poison gas. See Deborah all you like—I shan't interfere. Besides I shall be very busy in the future. I'm looking into an antitoxin for the influenza that will save thousands of lives every year. This time I shall be successful, and—well, perhaps it's more valuable to devise a means of saving than a means of slaying."

"You said a mouthful," observed Annabel—quoting, I fear, from George.

"Eh?" said Professor Peters.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

I HAD considered that the history of George ended at this point and I was about to write "Finis." But Annabel, who has been reading the manuscript as fast as I write it, just now broke into what for her is loud laughter. I turned to her, raising inquiring eyebrows.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"My dear," said she, "do you pretend to have written a narrative about George?"

"Why, yes," I answered rather stiffly, "I certainly do pretend to have done that. In what way have I failed?"

"Don't you see——" she began, and stopped to laugh again. I waited with dignity.

"Why, don't you see that the story's not about George at all? It's all about you!"

I meditated this amazing statement in silence for a while, and the more I meditated the firmer grew the insidious suspicion that she was right. Oh, heavens, of course she's right! She always is!















